This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

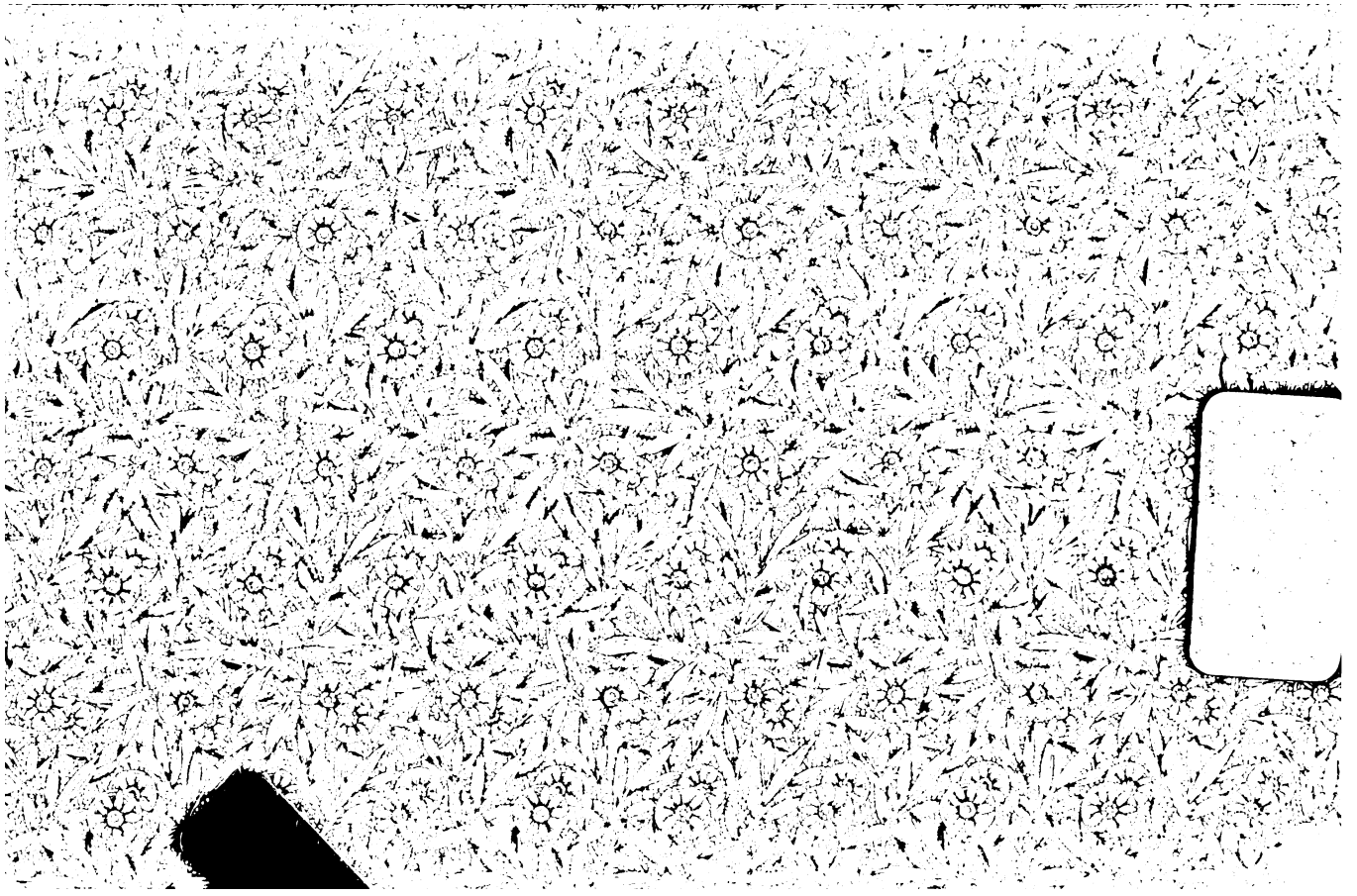
+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

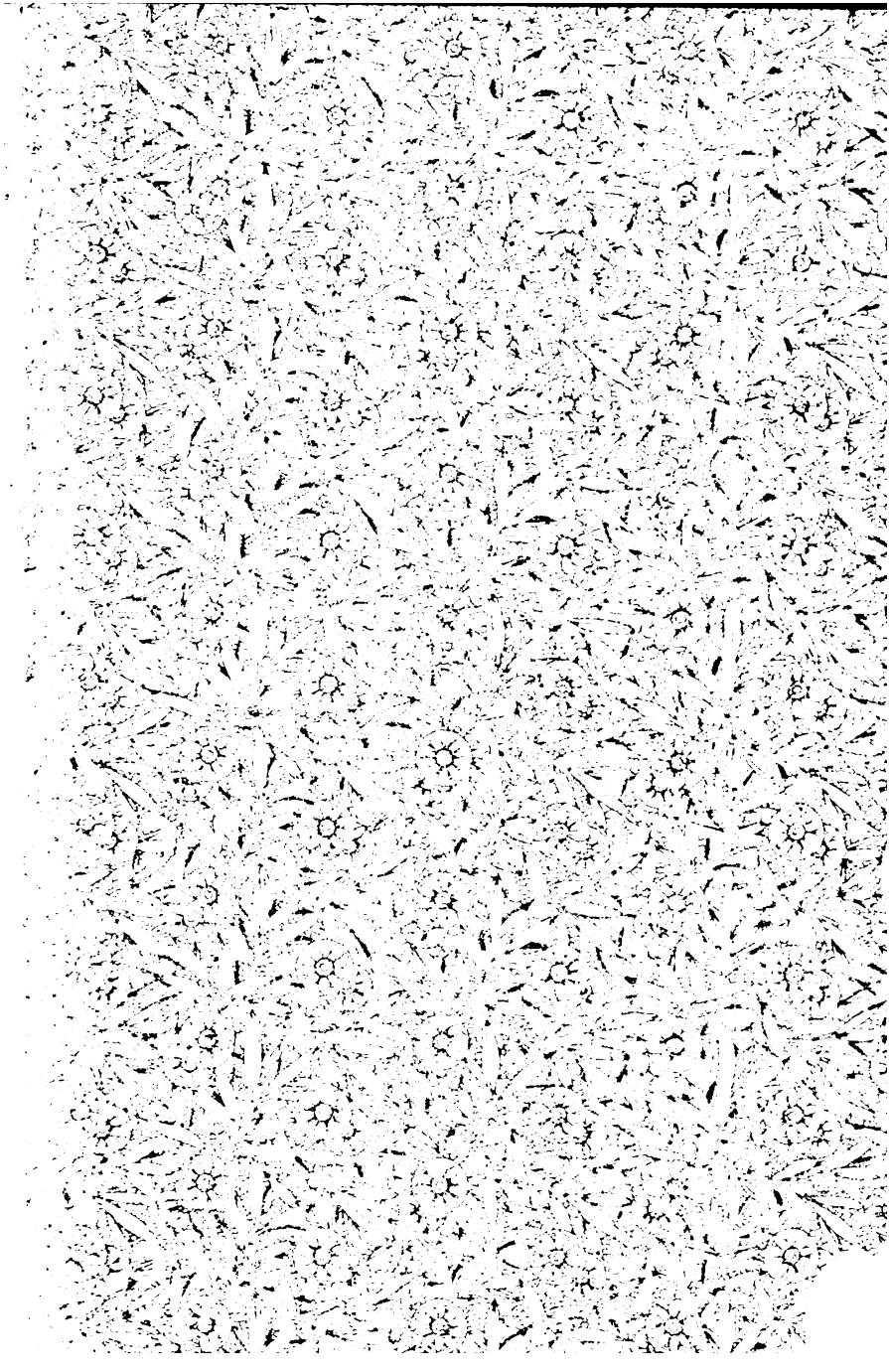
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`





600064365U

ENTRANCED WITH A DREAM.

A NOVEL.

BY

RICHARD ROWLATT,

AUTHOR OF 'FISHING IN DEEP WATERS.'

BODLEIAN LIBRARY 11 JAN 83 OXFORD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON: F. V. WHITE & CO.,
31 SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1883.

[*All Rights reserved.*]

251. k. 229.

F. V. WHITE & CO.'S

SELECT NOVELS.

Crown 8vo, cloth, 3s. 6d. each.

The following Volumes of the Series are now ready:—

MY SISTER THE ACTRESS. By FLORENCE MARRYAT.

'"My Sister the Actress" is the best novel we have had the pleasure of reading from the pen of Miss Marryat.'—*John Bull.*

THE DEAN'S WIFE. By Mrs EILOART.

'Any reader who wants a good story thoroughly well told cannot do better than read "The Dean's Wife."'—*John Bull.*

A BROKEN BLOSSOM. By FLORENCE MARRYAT.

'A really charming story, full of delicate pathos and quiet humour; pleasant to read and pleasant to remember.'—*John Bull.*

TWO MEN AND A MAID. By HARRIETT JAY.

'Compared with the former works of the authoress of "The Queen of Connaught," this novel must be pronounced second to none.'—*Graphic.*

SWEETHEART AND WIFE. By Lady CONSTANCE HOWARD.

'The story from first to last is attractive, and cannot fail to command wide favour.'—*Whitehall Review.*

PHYLLIDA. By FLORENCE MARRYAT.

'"Phyllida" is a novel of which the author may be justly proud.'—*Morning Post.*

BARBARA'S WARNING. By the Author of 'Recommended to Mercy.'

COLSTON AND SON, PRINTERS, EDINBURGH.

ENTRANCED WITH A DREAM.

CHAPTER I.

JESSE'S sudden springing to his feet, while the exclamation of 'Good God!' that burst from his lips, caused the stranger to take a step backward to avoid what, for a moment, he took as the action of a madman, or one suffering from the effects of drink. But he was soon undeceived, for Jesse, after attempting to say something more, sank back again into his chair, and covering his face with his hands, murmured, 'Surely I am dreaming.'

'My poor fellow,' said the physician, 'dreams are for the night, and you see it is still broad day.'

'You sent for me,' he added, after a pause, 'and I am come to see what I can do for you.'

'You can do much for me—much! If this is not a dream,' cried Jesse, snatching his hand again from before his face, and endeavouring to get upright on his feet.

The physician, seeing his weak state, pressed him gently back into his chair, placed his hand on his forehead, and then his finger on his pulse. These simple acts did more for the spent man than any number of words could have done. Jesse felt the cool hand of the stranger on his heated brow, and then on his wrist, as he attentively regarded a watch he held in his hand. The idea of its being a dream left him, followed by a thousand thoughts, rushing tumultuously across his brain, for which, from his weakness, he could not find words.

'You have been overtaxing your strength,' said the physician, 'and will have to pay for your indiscretion by spending a few days in bed.'

'In bed!' murmured Jesse. 'Is it fever?'

'No, I trust not; but if you have no friends in the city, you will do well to make this hotel your home for a while. I will order a bed to be prepared for you.'

The manager, who was fearful the business of the house would be injured, if a gentleman suffering from some unknown disease were admitted, said,—

'I have a bedroom at your service; but would not the gentleman be better off in a private house or hospital?'

'A room here will do very well.'

'But will our other visitors be content to keep him here?'

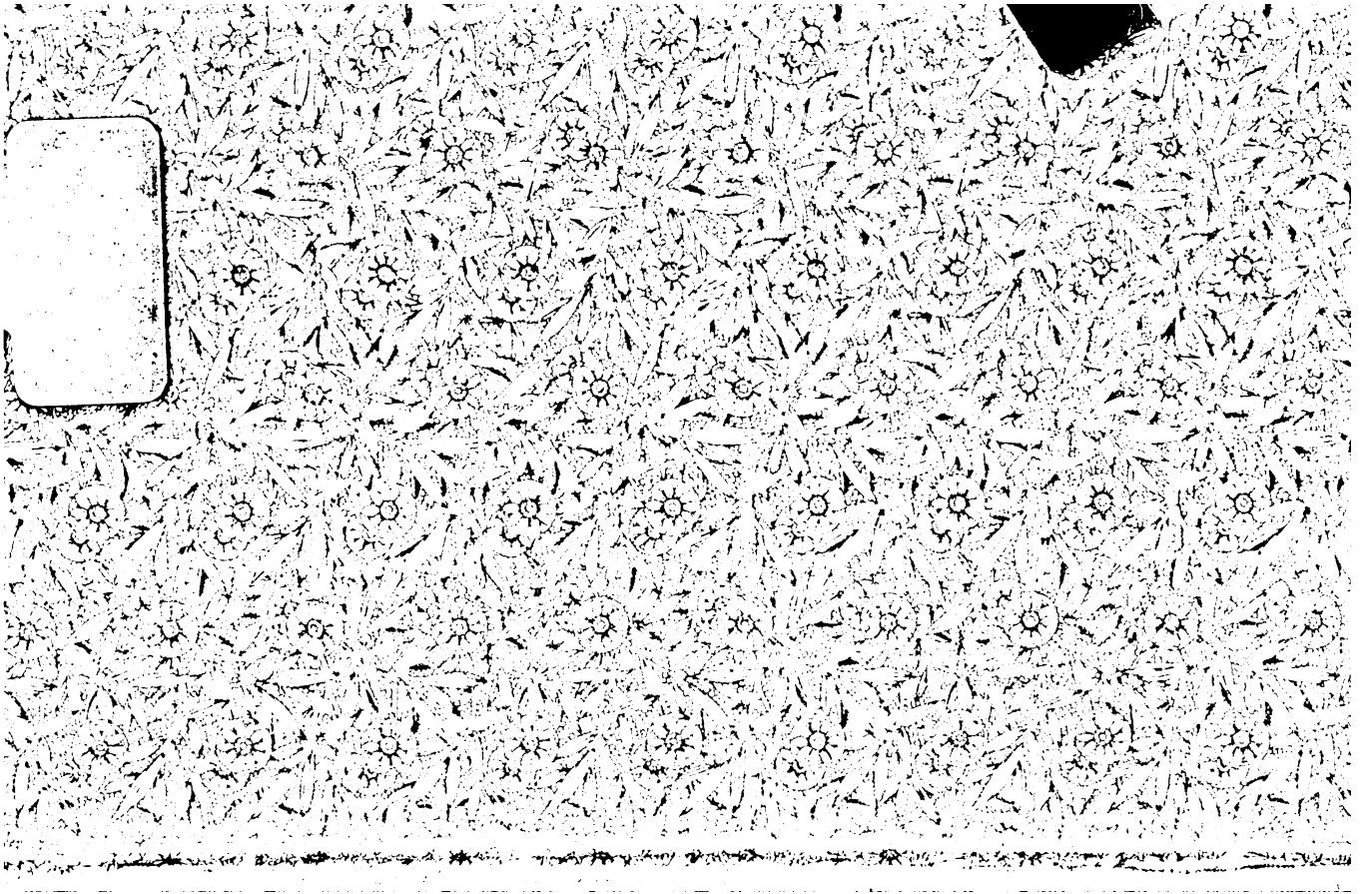
'You need not fear,' said the physician. 'He is suffering from the common fault of young travellers. A little rest and gentle treatment will soon put him on his legs again, I trust.'

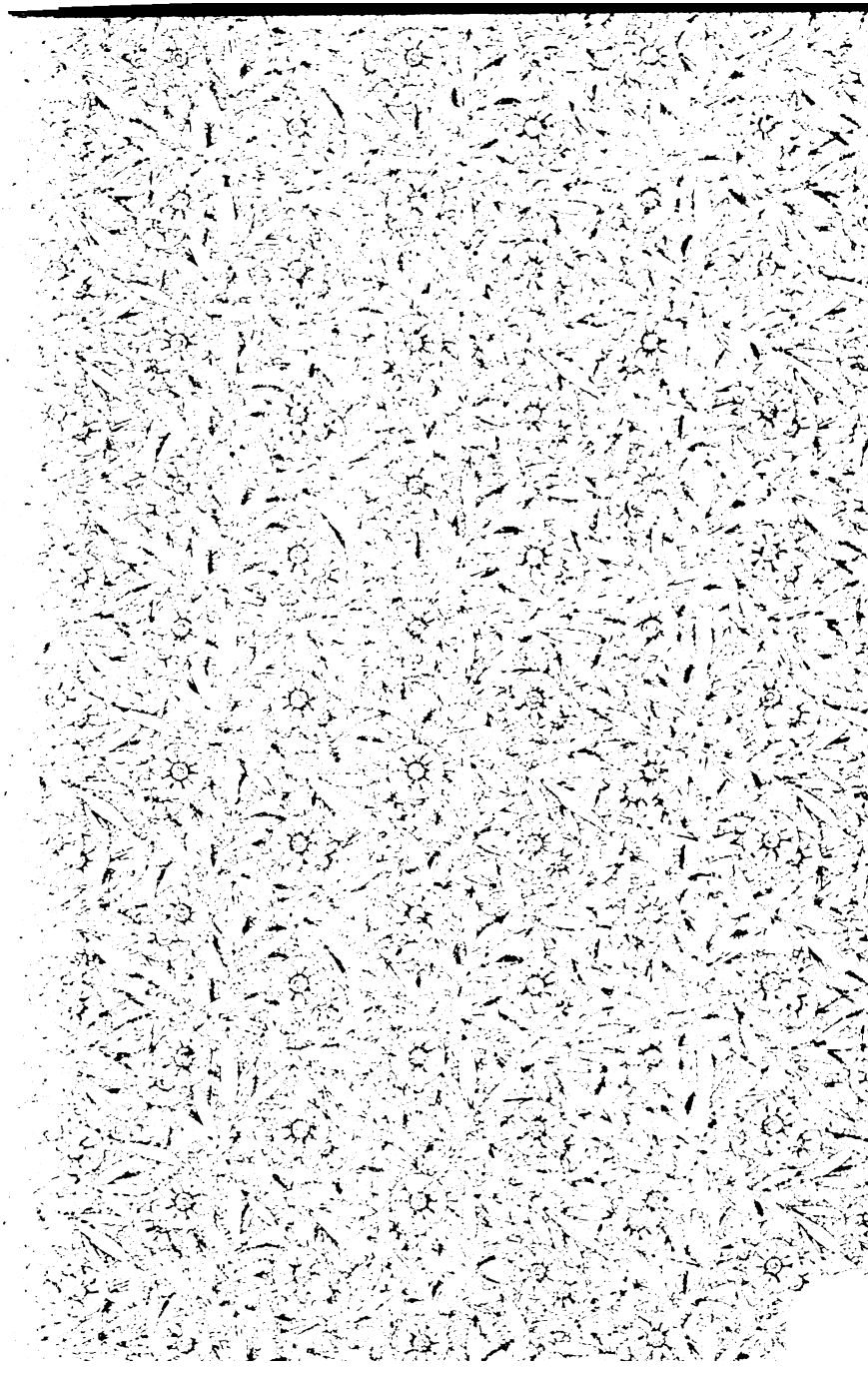
'You see,' said the manager, still doubtful, 'you are both strangers here. Will you allow our medical man to see the gentleman?'

'Yes, twenty of them, if you like. Only be quick about it, or I shall have to complain of your want of preparedness to receive travellers.'

The medical man soon appeared, and the difficulty of finding accommodation there was overcome.

Jesse's weakness rendered him, if not unable, at least unwilling to take any part in the discussion on the cause or extent of his illness. He saw with secret satisfaction and pleasure that his first visitor was disposed to be his





Poor Jesse, much as he desired to obtain all the information his new friend could give him, and satisfy his every doubt, was obliged to be content. He was no longer the strong, robust, spirited youth he had been when in the woods, gun in hand, trampling through brambles and beds of brake, thistles, and nettles, with as little apparent difficulty as he would have had in passing from one end of a drawing-room to the other.

But nature, the kind nurse of the weary body left to herself under favourable circumstances, came softly to his aid. After allowing him to muse a while in quiet on the happy discovery he had made, put her hand gently on his forehead, and singing a lullaby in his ear, charmed him off to sleep. From this he was aroused by his new friend, who, entering the room at the appointed time, was closely followed by a waiter, with a luncheon tray, which he placed on a table near the bed.

'Now,' said the physician, 'we must make up for past neglect.'

'You are very kind and considerate,' said Jesse.

'A man must be a poor thing,' replied his friend, 'who sees a fellow-countryman by the

road-side, and does not hold out a helping hand to him.'

'You are giving me a practical lesson.'

The luncheon having been disposed of apparently to the satisfaction of both gentlemen, the physician said,—

'Now, if your inquiries respecting my visit to Brighton are not too personal or curious, I shall be happy to listen to them.'

'Do you remember,' asked Jesse, 'the subject of the conversation you had with your friend in the hotel at Brighton?'

'Not in the slightest degree.'

'Perhaps a report in a newspaper you had just read will recall it to your mind. A man had been shot on the estate of a gentleman near London, and an innocent man accused of murdering him.'

'I have a faint recollection of something of the kind, but I could not now speak of it with certainty.'

'Not if I mention the name of Sir Edward Harewood, which gave rise to your relating an anecdote respecting the life of the immediate predecessor of the present owner of Woodcome Hall, the family seat?'

'Oh yes, I remember now; you allude to the late Sir Henry Harewood and his only

son, but I was not aware that I had any one listening to my words besides the friend to whom I was speaking.'

'I was sitting in the room,' said Jesse, 'when you and your friend took your places near me, and should doubtless have taken no special notice of what you were saying, had not the name of Sir Henry Harewood reached my ear.'

'You could not be acquainted with him.'

'No;' replied Jesse, 'he died before I was born; but an incident you related in speaking of his son strangely connected itself with an event with which I was deeply engaged at the time.'

'You are then, I presume,' said the physician, 'in some way connected with the family?'

'Did I not feel,' rejoined Jesse, 'that I was in the presence of a friend, I might in reply content myself by saying yes, slightly, but I cannot do so now; I must at once confess that I am the second son of the present Sir Edward Harewood.'

'Had I been aware of that,' said the physician, 'I would not have annoyed you with the account I gave to my friend.'

'My annoyance arose not from what I heard, but from the fact that I heard so little, and I

am now most anxious to learn all the particulars of the circumstances to which you alluded when speaking of the son.'

'I know nothing of your family secrets,' rejoined the physician, 'and all I can tell you of the incident you refer to is very little, and I think for the present we had better not touch upon it. You are becoming excited.'

'It is my ignorance that excites me.'

'Well, then,' said the physician, 'if you will be quiet, I will endeavour to cure it.' He then ran over the particulars Jesse had listened to at Brighton, and concluded by saying, 'I shall now leave you to muse upon what I have said. In the evening, if you would like me to come and sit with you for an hour or two, I shall hold myself at your service. I have ordered you what you must be content to think is an excellent dinner.'

When the evening came, Jesse was able to take an active part in the conversation that ensued. He gave the physician a brief account of the cause of his journey, and his long, weary, and unsuccessful search.

'I am slightly acquainted with the village where the young lady and her aunt lived,' said the physician. 'It is not far from Heilbron, but many a mile from Brussels, and I should

imagine, after the labour you have spent in vain, you would feel little inclination to recommence your search.'

'The cause of my want of success hitherto,' replied Jesse, 'is not far to seek. I have been working, I suspect, on an erroneous statement, if not an altogether false one. I could from the first discover no base to rest my inquiries upon, or perhaps I should rather say no point I could fix upon as a base. With your kind assistance, the case will assume an entirely different aspect. When you think I am able to undertake the journey, I shall go direct to the village you name. Perhaps I may get all the information I require there, but if I do not, I trust I shall come upon some track upon which I can start with a fair chance of success.'

'You must not undertake the journey at present.'

'I hope I shall be equal to it in the course of a day or two.'

'A week's rest would be more to the purpose,' said the physician; 'but if you will attend strictly to my advice, you may venture, I think, in two days from this time.'

'And may I hope to have your company part of the way?' asked Jesse.

'For the whole of it, unless some unforeseen occurrence should send me off in another direction, which is not at all likely to be the case. The primary object I had in view on leaving home was to visit some old friends in England, while I took a few weeks' rest from work.'

'Had an angel from heaven,' said Jesse, 'directed your steps, you could not have been of more signal service to me and the cause I have so deeply at heart.' He then went more fully into the history of Miss Montag and her brother as far as it had come before him, and concluded by confessing his love for the sister, and the difficulty he had, when her origin was unknown, of speaking out boldly to his father.

'Your object is doubtless a very excellent one,' remarked the physician, 'but I am afraid you are engaged in a very unfortunate business. Under any circumstances, you will find it a very difficult matter to persuade your father that it would be right for you to marry such a person; and to act in opposition to a father's will is a very serious thing to contemplate, from whatever point of view it may be regarded.'

'If I can work out my plan, as I now hope I shall be able to do,' said Jesse cheerfully, 'I have no fear that I shall be even tempted to act in opposition to my father's will. He is a

just man, and will not call upon me to make any unnecessary sacrifice.'

On the appointed day they set out on their journey southward. Jesse was not so strong as his companion could have desired him to be, but the hopeful nature of his errand raised his spirits so far above his late depression, that he was scarcely conscious of the difference of his present state of health and that which he usually enjoyed. The railway has rendered the journey from Heilbron to Brussels a mere trifle to what it was only a few years since, but rapid and easy as the trains may now be, it is still a long, and to one who is anxious to be at the end of his journey with as little delay as possible, and weary ride.

But, like all other successful journeys, in due course it was accomplished, and the physician, adding to the many favours he had already conferred upon Jesse, took him to his own house at Heilbron, and the next morning went with him to the much-talked-of village. He had, at his first interview with Jesse, been greatly struck with his appearance. Perhaps his entirely dependent state on those around him greatly aided the growth of this feeling, when it had once taken possession of his heart. As time passed on, the more he saw of the

honest simplicity of his character, so much the more did his friendly feeling increase towards him.

In the village to which they were driven, they found several people who remembered the once beautiful girl; but few of them could give any particulars of her movements. She was reported to have lived very quietly in her cottage with her aunt, until she removed to another village, where she was married, and her aunt died. That the husband's business caused him to spend much of his time from home, until he entirely deserted her, whereupon she fell in arrears with her landlord for rent, and had the greater part of her furniture taken from her. That she was then understood to have moved to a smaller house in another village, after which all that they could there further learn of her was of a very shadowy character, and evidently not to be depended on.

The physician went on with Jesse to the second village, and proposed, in the evening, that they should both return to Heilbron; but Jesse was too eager to follow up a clue he had obtained, to allow an hour to escape from him without its being turned to account.

'I must be at home to-night,' said the physician, 'and if I cannot induce you to re-

turn with me, we must part here; but I trust it will only be for a season, as I should be very sorry to lose sight of you altogether.'

'If you would be sorry, sir,' said Jesse, 'what think you must be my feelings in parting with one to whom I feel I owe not only my present hopeful position, but my life also?'

'You set too high a value on my services,' rejoined the physician; 'but, notwithstanding, the best means you have of showing me that you have appreciated them is by taking care of your health, and letting me occasionally hear from you.'

'That I will not fail to do,' replied Jesse, and thus, after a few more words, they parted, the one to return to Heilbron to renew his practice, and the other in an opposite direction, to follow up his inquiries in a distant village for the missing family.

Arrived at the place to which he had been directed, Jesse had but little difficulty in discovering the humble abode to which the wanderer had removed; but unfortunately he found that, after she had stopped but a short time there, she again got her few things together, and started in a neighbour's cart with her two children, a boy and a girl, for another village in the direction of the Rhine.

Thus far, after leaving Heilbron, Jesse had gone on, step by step, tracing the course of the unfortunate family; but here he came to a sudden halt. The man who had carried them away was not to be found. His little establishment had long since been broken up, and he, it was said, had gone to America and died there.

Without one hint to guide him, Jesse went forward, and after wandering about for two days making incessant inquiries of any one and every one who he thought could help him, he felt himself sinking again into his late listless despair. He became irresolute, and did not know what to do, till a sudden impulse seized upon him, and he determined to return to Heilbron and invoke once more the advice and aid of his disinterested friend, the physician.

'I am sorry for your disappointment,' said the physician on receiving him again into his house; 'but I am glad to see you did not cast the advice I gave you to the wind. You must give me all the particulars of your doings that escaped your memory when writing, so that we may judge of what we have yet to do.'

'When I look at you,' said Jesse, 'I feel

I must succeed; your hopefulness counteracts my fear.'

'That is well,' said the physician, 'for you and for me; and I am the more encouraged to be hopeful since it produces so happy an effect upon you.'

That night before they retired to rest, they went carefully over every particle of the information obtained by Jesse in his late search. They endeavoured to discover what had been the ruling principle in the girl's mind in her various movements from the place in which she had been left by her supposed husband.

They gathered from this consideration that she had disliked to make her circumstances known to any one on the spot. She had spoken of herself as a married woman, and said she was expecting her husband would meet her; but if he did not, she must go to him. And in what direction had she gone? As far as they could trace her certainly, towards the river Rhine, near to which she had disappeared.

'An idea has just struck me,' said the physician, 'that she did not make any stay in the place, but passed from it to the river at Manheim.'

'But her object in doing so?' said Jesse despondingly.

'That remains to be discovered. Did you hear anything of the general business of the man who took her, according to your report, to the town? Just turn to your notes upon that point.'

Jesse opened his note-book and read:—'The woman, with her two children, left the village in a cart. The owner, a poor man, but sober, honest, and industrious, got his living by doing little odd jobs for his neighbours—buying vegetables, poultry, fish, etc., at the different gardens and markets, and retailing them in Manheim. He and a younger brother realised their little property and left Germany for the United States. *P.S.*—Reports reached their late home that shortly after landing they both took fever and died.'

'That will bear thinking about,' observed the physician. Then, after a pause, he added, 'If I can get a friend to take charge of my patients again, I will go with you as far as Manheim.'

'How can I ever repay you?' said Jesse.

'We will talk of that when we have completed our task,' said the physician. 'But does it not strike you that you are, perchance, not under so many obligations to me as you imagine?

Every man has his weak point, and you must have gathered from the language I have indulged in that I partake largely of what is called a romantic turn of mind; that I am fond of rambling about and interesting myself in events which, but for my curiosity, would not concern me in the least.'

'Had you crossed my path some twenty years since, when I was in full practice and in the pursuit of fame and fortune, I could not have bestowed so much time upon you; but now, thanks to my success in life, I have accomplished at least one object I then had in view, and can afford to lie by and give young men a chance of struggling forward without meeting with an old-established name to stop their progress.'

'Really, sir,' said Jesse, with an attempt at a laugh, 'one would imagine to hear you speak that I had conferred a favour on you instead of my being your debtor. Is it not strange,' he added, 'that one at times feels compelled to take a certain course without knowing from whence the compulsion comes, or whither it will lead one? The idea that I have in my mind may not fully agree with my present experience, because from my wishing to meet with you after your departure from Brighton. I

had an object in view. But I cannot tell you how overwhelming my desire was to see you again, though I could not in any degree look forward to the kind reception I was to meet with from you.'

'The pleasure of our meeting has not been all on your side, as you may perceive. But it is getting late now, and we must to bed. To-morrow, by mid-day, I think I may safely say I will hold myself at your service to renew our search.'

At the appointed time the next day they re-commenced their travels, going direct to Manheim, where they spent three days of weary wandering from point to point, in which they did not gain one iota of information they could turn to account, or that gave them a single encouraging glimpse into the future. What more could they do? They feared to ask each other. The words seemed to hang on their lips—all further search in this place will be in vain.

At a time when they had neither expectation nor hope that better fortune was awaiting them, they found themselves suddenly in possession of a fact that sent the blood dancing through their veins, and reillumined their brightest hopes. They were listlessly walking by the

side of the river, looking at the boats as they passed up and down the stream—some full of merchandise, and others loaded with pleasure-seekers, who seemed to be but little aware of the caution necessary for the proper management of a boat, as they amused themselves by swaying it to and fro till the roughened water appeared ready to leap into the midst of them.

'My good people,' said a voice near to one of the most reckless of these parties, 'if you are not quiet, you will certainly get a wetting, if nothing worse.'

'Thank you—thank you, sir,' was returned with a merry laugh, but with no perceptible improvement in their behaviour.

Jesse turned his head in the direction from whence the warning voice had come, and saw by his side an elderly gentleman, who, in return for the thanks he had received, replied,—

'I would advise you to be warned in time.'

'They appear in extreme danger,' observed the physician.

'One would think so,' rejoined the speaker; 'and yet with all their recklessness we seldom have a serious accident here. They no sooner get on the water than they appear to have charmed lives.'

The conversation thus opened was continued upon common subjects as they prolonged their walk by the river.

When they had left the town some distance behind them, the gentleman observed,—

'You are strangers here, I perceive, and therefore perhaps are not aware that the banks of the river, after a certain hour in the evening, are not considered quite so safe as the well-lighted streets of a city.'

'You do not reside in Manheim?' said the physician.

'No,' said the gentleman. 'I occasionally go into the city and return, as you see me, on the bank of the river to my house in the village we are now approaching.'

'Then you are well acquainted with the character of this neighbourhood?'

'Yes, I ought to be, you will say,' replied the stranger, 'when I tell you I have witnessed the christening of the grandfathers of some of the children you see scampering about yonder. But you must not think when I spoke of a late walk here, I was alluding to any of our people, as they are rather sufferers from the roguery of others than rogues themselves. It is the holes and corners of the town that send us out the unpleasant visitors I spoke of.'

'You must be well acquainted with the river-side people?'

'Yes; and have been for the last fifty years.'

'I am glad to hear you say so,' remarked the physician, 'as we are a little concerned about a family that we believe migrated to the town some time since, of whom we can find no trace.'

'I know but little of the people there,' said the stranger.

'We are not certain that she entered the town. We traced her to a neighbouring village, and we believe we have some knowledge of the manner of her leaving it; but the persons who were with her we find went to America and died there.'

"Do you know the names of these persons?'

'Yes, or rather I should say, we believe we do,' replied the physician, and then in a few words he repeated all they had been able to gather of the dead men and their belongings.

'I think, perhaps,' said the stranger, 'I may be able to help you to carry on your inquiries a little further. I remember the men you have described very well, and I think I recollect something of the young woman and her two children. They did not come to our village, but to another at a little distance, where I have

a friend like myself of long standing. We often meet, and I have an indistinct recollection of something he told me upon the subject. It is too late to walk over and see him to day; but—'

'Could we not get a carriage and drive over?' cried Jesse, in a state of great excitement.

'If the expense is no object,' said the stranger, eyeing Jesse curiously, 'no doubt you could.'

'Then by all means let us have one; and you will kindly accompany us, I trust?' said the physician.

'With pleasure,' said the gentleman.

The information that now came to hand was of an important character. The stranger's friend, amongst other things, was able to tell his visitors that he remembered the young woman in question perfectly well. That she was at times very strange and excitable, and had imparted to him what he considered a true history of a part of her life. That a strong desire appeared to have taken possession of her mind that she had a friend in England, and if she could find him, he would protect her children, as for herself she seemed utterly careless.

'I had,' continued the gentleman, 'very serious doubts whether she was sufficiently possessed of her wits to have charge of the children. But she spoke rationally enough when she assured

me she would have money sufficient to take her to England, but that she was afraid to go alone. It so happened at the time that one of my people here had a friend, who was a stewardess on one of the river packets. I found means to see this person, and induce her to take charge of the woman and her children not only down the river, but to give them in charge of some one who was going in the sea vessel to London.'

'And she left you for London?' said Jesse eagerly.

'Yes,' was the reply; 'and I gave her letters which would have procured her shelter in an institution there, had she presented them, which, from some cause or other, she never did.'

'Then you do not know that she reached London?'

'Yes, I was assured of that by the stewardess, for as she did not write, as I expected she would, I became a little anxious about her, and did not rest until I had fully satisfied myself that she reached London safely.'

'There is only one thing now that remains to be settled to assure us that we are dealing with the right person. Do you remember the date of her departure for London?'

'Yes, perfectly; and I have it in my journal, from which you may take a copy if you please

As soon as Jesse had secured that, he had but one object in view, which was to set out for London by the first train that left the city. With many thanks he parted with the philanthropists, and, had he been able, he would have persuaded his good friend, Mr Anson, the physician, to accompany him; but as that could not be, he parted with him in tears, and an earnest promise to write to him immediately on reaching home, and pay him another visit as soon as an opportunity presented itself.

'Take care of your health, and look hopefully forward,' were the last words of the physician that greeted his ears, as the express for London left the station.

CHAPTER II.

CIRCUM did not require a month at Islington to complete his business, but as he found himself in very comfortable quarters, he was in no particular hurry to leave. Lyson's letter notifying his departure from Boulogne duly reached him at his lodgings, and set his mind at rest with respect to him. If his purse had not reminded him of his dependent position, it is probable he would have spent months in his new home, everything came to hand so very pleasantly.

He had improved his acquaintance with Mrs Wilkins, and in part wormed himself into the good opinion of Miss Montag. Had she been a mere thoughtless girl, he would doubtless have gained the information he required more readily; but with his skilful mode of proceeding, he met with but few obstacles to prevent him from discovering that Miss Montag had a

brother, who had been brought up with her at Woodfield, and who was then an assistant master in a large school at Bath.

Mrs Wilkins, from having lived in a branch of the Harewood family, was full of anecdotes of its several members, and it was curious to see how much she had told Circum, without her being at all aware of the fact. His method was not to go direct to the point upon which he needed information, but to pass, as it were, in a circle round it gradually, closing in as any favourable opportunity for doing so presented itself.

Devoid of the shadow of suspicion of the true character of her new acquaintance, the old lady chatted on to him as freely as if she had known him for the last twenty years. There were several reasons why Miss Montag should be less communicative; she was better educated, and had read more than Mrs Wilkins. Then she was not so old, and did not know much more of the family affairs at the Hall than what she had gathered from Mrs Smith, and last, though not least, she was in a pensive state of mind, occasioned by her fondly dwelling upon some whispered words Jesse had poured into her ears, just before their last parting.

Of her love for him, or of his for her, she

had made no allusion to her hostess, and therefore it was not at all likely she would to a stranger, however well he might lay his traps to catch her unwary words. She could not have spoken of certain incidents in the past, even to a dear friend. The more she thought of them, the more she became perplexed to understand her real position. Why was Sir Edward's manner gentle and kind to her when he was so cruelly separating her from all she best loved on earth.

And why had he chosen such a person as Mrs Wilkins to place her with. She found she was an old lady who appeared to take a pleasure in letting every one know with whom she came in contact that she had been a domestic servant all her life. Did he desire her to look upon herself as on an equality with a domestic servant if not one herself? If so, what treatment had she to expect from him for the future? Would he continue even his former protection of her? and if he did not, what would become of her, and how could her love for Jesse end but in miserable disappointment.

Could she still hope that his love for her would, as he had assured her it would, overcome all difficulties. Would not every day

tend to separate their minds farther from each other? How could it be otherwise when he was living with gentlemen and ladies, and she had no one to associate with but old servants, petty tradespeople, and shopkeepers? She felt she was in a cruel position, and if she could have had any serious doubt of Jesse's constancy, she would have been very miserable indeed.

He had expressed a wish to her that she should not write to her brother a word of their secret engagement, but leave the task to him, which he would undertake to do in full after he had spoken to his father; and to this she had offered no opposition. But despite her confidence in him, she felt the irksomeness of her surroundings very sadly. Day followed day without the slightest change taking place as would appear for better or worse in that which so nearly concerned her happiness.

She had promised Sir Edward that, without his permission, she would hold no communication with his son, and the idea of breaking her promise did not occur to her; but she could not help feeling that it was a little hard that she should be kept in total ignorance of what was passing at Woodfield, and that she could not hear one single word of Jesse, even to assure her that he was well.

But all these thoughts, and many more of the same kind, she kept carefully to herself. Circum suspected, from his close observance of her, that all was not as it should be in her little heart; but with all his skill, assisted by certain cues he received from Mrs Wilkins, he could not, on that subject, obtain her confidence. 'No matter,' he thought, 'I have learnt enough for my present purpose, and there can be no mistake about her brother being the boy I have been in search of. He is now evidently under the influence of the redoubtable Sir Edward, and it will shortly be my interest and business to make some playful inquiries respecting him, and then induce him to look to me as his best friend.'

For a while it was a serious question with him whether he would join Lyson at the Down-end vicarage as an old friend, or stop at some village near at hand, and act the part of a stranger to all in the country. The first had promise of personal comfort, but that, at the present time, must not be too closely looked to. There was only one difficulty of going as a stranger, which consisted in his chance of getting too soon at the bottom of his purse. 'I like the idea best,' he thought, 'of the stranger; and if I settle on that and find it

a little expensive, I must make for the vicarage and free quarters.'

Having secured a friend in Mrs Wilkins, and a retreat in his present lodgings, should he have occasion to return again to London, he took leave of his newly-made friends, mingling with his good-bye many thanks and expressions of gratitude, with a few tears for the great and unlooked-for kindness he had experienced from them.

Before he left London he provided himself with a small stock-in-trade, by means of which he would have an excuse for introducing himself to the notice of any person from whom he desired to obtain information. Note-paper with envelopes and pens. A few tracts, and certain nostrums of home manufacture, which he had found did him good service in Germany, possessing no other virtue than might be found in a mixture of bread and chalk brought to a state of consistency by the admixture of a little gum softened with water from a boiled onion.

Woodfield, he had learnt, was a quiet village about five miles from the station where he would have to stop, but that there was a carrier going from it to the village with whom he might ride if he could suit to meet

him at a certain hour in the afternoon. This, for various reasons, he resolved to do. His business was to get as much information as he could of the inhabitants of Woodfield without seeming to go out of his way to secure it. A chandler's shop or a carrier's cart are most suitable for village gossip. It appears as natural to them as feathers to a duck's back. The old lady weighing out the tea and sugar must talk, there is no keeping her from it; and so with the carrier's cart that passes on from corner to corner, taking up a lass here and a grandmother there. The one looking with bright eyes to the future, and seeing nothing in the world worth thinking about that will not invite a laugh; while the old lady, with dim eyes and aching limbs, takes her seat with a groan, which seems to say,—'My poor old bones do ache so,' as she looks back to the troubles and trials of the past, and thinks what a weary world this is to live in.

Then the carrier, old or young, as the case may be, has his welcome to all comers, and receives them as friends. Listens to their tales of pleasure or pain, and in return tells them the news of the day as it has reached him from many quarters.

Circum, having safely accomplished his jour-

ney by rail, found the carrier's cart near the station nearly ready to start. Two passengers had taken their seats within the cart. One, a comely old dame, the wife of a farm bailiff, and the other, a buxom girl, a kitchen-maid at Woodcome Hall.

'I am afraid you have not room for me,' said Circum.

'Oh yes, plenty of room,' cried the driver; 'jump up.'

'But I do not see any place to jump into!' said Circum.

'Yes, here's plenty of room in here,' cried the girl.

'You are getting like me, sir,' said the bailiff's wife, 'rather stiff in the joints.'

'Well, just a little,' said Circum, as he clambered up and squeezed himself in between the women.

'I don't think the biggest men have the sharpest bones,' whispered the girl to the driver, as she found Circum's elbow making a dent in her fat side.

'That's a fine specimen of a horse you have there,' said Circum to the driver, as they moved away from the station.

'I should rather think he is,' said the driver. 'He cost money enough, I know.'

'Have you had him long?'

'No; bought him the other day.'

'Now, Jasper,' cried the girl, 'if I didn't hear Nancy say she bought him and paid for him herself.'

'But, you know, we two are one now?' said Jasper, 'and so whatever Nancy does I do.'

'Married, ay?' said Circum.

'Yes, all right about that.'

'And a precious job you had to make it all right,' cried the girl.

'Never you mind,' retorted Jasper, 'only take care when it comes to your turn you manage better.'

'I will,' laughed the girl; 'but I suppose I have no chance while I am young. I must wait, like my neighbours, till I get old. Had you there, Jasper.'

'What a girl you are,' said the bailiff's wife.

'Do you think so?' roared the girl.

'You seem to have some fine trees in your meadows here?' said Circum. 'I suppose the land is good?'

'Well,' said Jasper, 'I think it is about the best of any in this part of the country.'

'Some good houses and gentlemen's parks near?' said Circum inquiringly.

'That over there belongs to Mr Somerton, and on this side to Sir Edward Harewood.'

'He lives at Woodfield, does he not?'

'Yes,' said Jasper, 'but the grounds go a long way out.'

'Yes, that they do,' said the bailiff's wife, 'for our farm is a good three miles round.'

'Sir Edward has a large family,' said Circum.

'Has he?' said Jasper. 'I didn't know that.'

'I meant to ask you if it was large,' said Circum.

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' said Jasper. 'I thought you said he had a large family.'

'Then he has not?' said Circum.

'No, unless two sons and two daughters are a great many.'

'And is that all his establishment consists of?'

'Yes, excepting his servants, horses, and dogs.'

'No visitors?'

'Oh yes, scores of them.'

'I mean, living with him in the house?'

'Yes, to be sure! they do,' said Jasper.

'What! scores of them?'

'Yes, but not all at the same time.'

'Is the vicarage near the Hall?' asked Circum.

'There it is, away there on the right side of the wood.'

'Have you not a clergyman of the name of Lyson somewhere in the neighbourhood?'

'About ten miles across the country.'

'Is he a good preacher?'

'He is too far off for us to know much about him.'

'Why, how you talk, Jasper,' broke in the girl; 'any one hearing you talk would think you were an old man, and had been a carrier here for nobody knows how many years, when you have only just left Mr Oliver's service, and set up for yourself.'

'I don't see,' said Jasper, 'what that has to do with it.'

'Why, you know, you used very often to ride over to Elston Court, which is very near Mr Lyson's.'

'Has Mr Lyson any children?' asked Circum.

'Yes,' said the bailiff's wife, 'he has two daughters at home with him, and a son abroad, nobody knows where.'

'I heard he was dead,' said Jasper.

'Oh, but that was all stuff.'

'Well,' said Jasper, 'if all I have heard of him is true, he wouldn't be much missed if he

was dead, for any good he has done while living.'

'Stop here, please,' said the bailiff's wife, 'and let me get down. I will walk across the field.'

'Put me down by the church,' said the girl, 'and don't take me by your house, to make your wife jealous.'

'Oh! she will not be jealous of you,' said Jasper.

'Not old enough,' said the girl. 'Well, never mind; here's the church, so please set me down.'

'And where shall I leave you, sir?' asked Jasper.

'At any place,' replied Circum, 'where you think there is a chance of my getting a night's lodging.'

'Lodgings are not very plentiful here just now,' said Jasper, 'but you might get a bed at the "Rose and Crown."'

'I would rather go to a private house.'

'Well,' said Jasper, 'this is my place,' as he pulled up at the end of the village.

As the cart stopped the door of the house was suddenly opened from within, and a little short woman appeared on the threshold, crying out, 'So here you are again, Jasper, come home,

like a good boy, to your own Nancy; and have you brought Mr Short with you?'

'No; he is not able to come for a week,' replied Jasper.

'There now,' said Nancy, 'what was the use of my stopping at home all the day to get the room ready for him, and he not a-coming for a week. I say it's tiresome, that it is.'

'Well,' said Jasper, 'perhaps you can take this gentleman in instead of him. You see, he is just come with me from the station, and wants to get a bed in the village for the night.'

'Couldn't let him have it for one night,' said Nancy. 'Leave us the dirt of a week for a night's pay.'

'Take me in,' said Circum, 'and I will pay you for a week, if I only stop one night.'

'That seems fair enough,' said Jasper.

'Is he respectable?' asked Nancy.

'Ask him, if you are not satisfied with his looks.'

'You seem all right,' said Nancy to Circum, as she looked him down from head to foot; 'but have you a good character?'

'Excellent,' replied Circum.

'Then come in,' said Nancy, 'and you shall have Mr Short's room for a week, but no longer, mind, unless he disappoints us again.'

By the time the traveller was fairly settled in his new lodgings, which would afford him so many opportunities for his plotting without the eye of suspicion resting upon him, Lyson had made himself quite at home at the Downend vicarage. He had found his father, as he expected, in a very low state; but he found also that, though he was at times fretful and peevish, he was in the full possession of his faculties, and not blinded by mere animal affection to the faults of his now professedly repentant son.

But it was not so with his sisters. If ever there was a poor, injured innocent on earth, that person was their dear brother, who, through the machinations of his enemies, had been an exile from England for so many years. They had excuses prepared for him on every side, and they were very earnest many times in asserting that they were astonished to see him looking so well after having passed through so many trials.

If it had not been for the presence of his father he would have indulged them with more tales of his imaginary wrongs from his enemies, and the falseness of his pretended friends; but there was something in the expression of the old man's face which told him that what fell upon his sisters' ears as gospel truth did not

convey that conviction to his mind, which was necessary for the success of his scheming.

Some days after his return, the vicar said to his son,—

'You have not spared yourself, Claypole, in the accounts you have given us of the easy manner in which you have allowed yourself to be swindled. But I must warn you that some of your statements I cannot understand, and others I find it difficult to believe. You tell me that for years the one desire of your heart has been to revisit the place of your birth, and yet in the next breath you mention a frivolous incident that held you in France.'

'I think you are a little hard upon me, father.'

'Hear what I have to say,' continued the vicar, 'and then answer me if you can. I repeat I feel it difficult to believe that you have ever really wished to return to us, and shall I say to your wife. Have I not sent you money to meet the expenses of your journey more than once, and for the arrangement of your affairs, even to the impoverishment of myself and the beggary of your sisters? and now if I am taken away from them before I am able to put aside a little portion for their use, what is to become of them I do not know. If it were not for my church living, you would have reduced me to

look twice at a penny before I gave it to a starving wretch to buy bread, lest the time should come when your sisters would want it for a like purpose.

'I tell you this, that you may know that although I am glad to have you at Downend again, I cannot be blind to your great faults, much less fall into the error of your sisters, who appear to think, because you have told them of your trouble, that the faults from which you have suffered have all originated in others, and that you have few or no sins that call upon you for repentance.'

'If they think so I shall be the first to tell them that they are greatly mistaken,' said Lyson; and then added, 'I come back a repentant sinner to do all I can to redeem my misspent time.'

'I trust you speak from your heart,' said the vicar, 'and that you will endeavour to, in the scriptural phrase, "bring forth fruit meet for repentance." In speaking to you as I have done, I have performed a task, and as you may perceive a very unpleasant one, but I could not rest until I had made you understand me. It is over now, and I will not again remind you of the past unless it reappears in the present, which I most heartily pray it may not do.'

'I will take care that it shall not,' rejoined Lyson; and then added, 'and now, since you have held the picture of my past life up before me, I will crave your attention for a few minutes, and then ask you to tell me if you do not think I have had some cause presented to me to produce the miserable failings of which I have been guilty. Some twenty years ago I left you for foreign service. I took with me a young wife, amiable as she was beautiful. One I had with difficulty won from a rich rival.'

'Surely you are beside yourself,' cried the vicar, interrupting him; 'I never heard of any rival, rich or otherwise. Your rival must have been an imaginary one, for I am satisfied Miss Cresswell was never conscious of the existence of such a being.'

'Whether she was conscious of it or not,' replied Lyson, 'I speak but the simple truth, and of which to this day I have the proof in my own hands, I speak of Sir Edward Harewood.'

'You amaze me,' said the vicar, turning very pale. 'Let me see your proof.'

'You shall see it, and know that Sir Edward Harewood was in love with my wife before I married her. The connection that has since existed between them, you and my sisters must be in a better position for judging than I am.'

'Your proof, your proof!' cried the vicar; 'I will not listen to one word more until you have placed it palpably before my eyes.'

Lyson's answer was to take excitedly or seemingly so a small packet of letters from his pocket-book, and when he had carefully unfolded one of them to hold it up before his father, as he said, 'You know the handwriting?'

'Yes, it is Sir Edward Harewood's.'

'Shall I read it to you?' said Lyson.

'No, no, give it to me with my spectacles, and I will read it for myself. I have nothing but my own eyes that I can trust.'

'On my word, sir,' said Lyson, 'you treat me worse than you would do the greatest stranger in the world.'

The vicar did not reply; his whole attention was taken up with the letter before him. It was one of those which Sir Edward had written to his then supposed friend, in which his love for Edith was not only strongly expressed, but his resolve to propose to her as soon as he had finished his college course, and was in a position to satisfy her father that his future prospects were such as would warrant his taking a wife.

Having read the letter, the vicar turned it over in his hand as he said, 'This has come upon me very unexpectedly. You must give

me time to think of it. I am not so strong as I was when you left me, either in mind or body.'

'You said,' observed Lyson, 'that I must appeal to the evidence of your eyes. I have done so, and I will now patiently wait for your reply. If you are not yet satisfied, I have other letters here couched in similar terms.'

'I have seen enough,' said the vicar; 'but tell me,' he added, after a pause, 'how did it happen that this letter was written to you? From its tone, it appears to have been written in confidence to a friend. Did the writer at that time know that you also were in love with Edith?'

'I must remind you,' said Lyson, 'that that is not the question. I undertook to satisfy you that, before I married my wife, Sir Edward was in love with her. I spoke not to condemn him, but in some manner to justify myself for the apparent careless manner in which I have been living away from you and my dear sisters.'

'You do not answer my question,' said the vicar, 'and I am too ill and weak to argue with you. Give me all the letters you have bearing on the subject, and leave them with me for an hour or two, and then I will tell you in what light I am disposed to view the transaction.'

'Here are four more letters,' said Lyson, as he placed them in the trembling hands of his father, 'and as you desire, I will leave them with you for a couple of hours. If I am not greatly mistaken, when you have read and considered their import, and remember how the parties during the last four years have been living in such close communion, you will better understand than you have yet done why I did not seek an interview with my wife immediately on my return.'

CHAPTER III.

LEFT to himself, the vicar spread the letters out on the table before him in the order of their dates, and then, one by one, read them carefully through. It was a heavy task for him, but he persevered to the end. Then he leaned back in his chair, and placing his left hand before his eyes, allowed his right to fall listlessly across his knees.

One thing was painfully apparent to him. His son's conduct to his friend could not be justified. The letters bore in every line evidence that they had been written in the unstudied freedom of personal friendship; and more than that, they gave evidence that they had been answered in a like spirit, without giving the slightest indication of the writer's love for Edith. But his son had told him 'that was not the question.' 'Perhaps it is not,'

sighed the vicar, 'but it is so nearly joined to it that I cannot look at the one without seeing the other.'

The first letter would have produced sentiments in the mind of an honourable man that must have caused him to answer it in a manner which would have put an end to the correspondence. He would have said to his friend, 'You have chosen the wrong person for the depositary of your secret. I am not bound to tell you that I am in love with the young lady myself, but I can hold no further communication with you upon the subject, unless your next letter is written in a totally different tone to the last.'

'Had my son acted in such a way, a personal explanation must have ensued. That he made a gross mistake in answering it as he did, is but too plain, even to the prejudiced eyes of a father; how, then, must it appear to those of a stranger?

'If Edith knew of Edward's love for her, she, too, must have been very blameworthy; but what is to be said if her regard for him was only what he thought it—that of a sister for a brother—and she was kept in ignorance of any other feeling having found a place in his heart?

'Who will answer the question. I cannot as I would. Everything tends to force the conviction upon me that my son kept her purposely in ignorance for the furtherance of his own views. What has occurred since I know not, and I would to God I were not called upon to inquire. But the burden that is laid upon me I must bear, if not cheerfully, at least with patient resignation. No one who has observed them can be ignorant of the familiar terms in which Edith and Sir Edward have for years been living. My daughters will doubtless remind me that they have often remarked upon its impropriety, and of the dulness of my comprehension in not understanding the state of affairs.'

At the end of two hours Lyson, accompanied by his sisters, returned to the room. He had marked out the lines, in his own mind, upon which he would go. He would be the injured husband and the forbearing son. Nothing should tempt him to speak harshly to his father, or of other than in pitying terms of his poor deluded wife.

'Well, father,' said Lyson, 'you have read my letters, and so, if you please, before I ask you for your opinion of them, I will restore them to a place of safety.'

'The best place for them would be the fire,' said the vicar.

'Oh, papa, how can you say so?' cried Miss Lyson.

'And have you seen them?' asked the vicar.

'To be sure we have, papa,' she replied. 'Brother has been very kind. You see he has full confidence in us, and would not have us ignorant of a matter that must soon come before the public, and—'

'Come before the public!' cried the vicar.

'Yes, certainly, papa. You surely would not have Claypole put up with his wrongs here in silence, whatever he may have had to do with bad people in France.'

'But he must first prove that he has been wronged.'

'Oh, papa, how cruel you are! Do you not remember how many times I and Dorothy have called your attention to the manner in which certain parties have met and conversed together, and how often we wished Claypole would return to stop it.'

'Yes, yes,' said the vicar, 'but what does that prove?'

'Everything!' was the triumphant answer.

'I think we are wandering from the question before us,' said Lyson. 'These letters I left

with you, that you might read and consider their import, may I ask if they have effected the purpose I intended they should do?'

'Yes, and more than you intended, I suspect,' replied the vicar. 'They have told me of a dishonourable action performed by one too nearly related to me to be left in ignorance of my opinion respecting it.'

'I grieve,' said Lyson, 'to perceive that you are still unforgiving,—that the faults and the sins of my early days have blinded you to the suffering I have had for years to endure.'

'Do, papa,' said Miss Lyson, 'be a little charitable to our poor, suffering brother. You must remember how happy he was in his marriage when he returned with us from the church.'

'Happy!' cried Lyson, as if unable to keep silence when the picture of his marriage was brought before him. 'Happy, did you say! Yes, I was happy then, and in my ignorance of the future I thought my happiness would last for ever. You know how devoted I was to my young wife, and how eager I was to take her to Paris and to introduce her into the best society there.'

'Ah, brother!' said Dorothy, 'you were too kind to her.'

'I must not have you think so,' said Lyson, 'though, indeed, I studied her every wish, and was often teased by gentlemen for my great attention to her.'

'Yes, and well you might be, brother,' said Dorothy.

'Then, within a year I brought her back to see her father and mother. You know how tenderly I watched over her, and how readily I agreed to go to London for a few days before we returned to Paris?'

'Yes, I remember,' said Miss Lyson; 'and when we begged you to stop a little longer at Downend, you said you could not, as some one would be greatly disappointed if you had not a few days to spare for London.'

'Then,' continued Lyson, 'when my poor wife fell sick and was recommended change of air, you know on more than one occasion how readily I agreed to let her return to Downend to spend a few weeks with her friends?'

'Oh yes, brother,' said Dorothy, 'we know it all but too well.'

'And how have I been rewarded!' cried Lyson, as he wiped a crocodile tear from his eye. 'In other words, what followed my devotion to my wife? Simply this. When, through the misconduct and jealousy of others, I lost

my appointment in Paris, and to escape annoyance removed to a distance, my wife—who should have been my comforter—would not join me in my exile, nor have me return to her at her father's house. What wonder, then, I would ask, if at times I became desperate, and sought to drive away my miserable thoughts at the card-table, where I had the misfortune to be cheated and robbed, as I now know one unaccustomed to the place was certain to be.

'But all is over now. Once more I am in the sanctity of a happy home, and how much soever I have been neglected and injured by one who has been living here in luxury—and, I fear, in sin—when she should, as in duty bound, have been by my side and sharing my discomforts, I would willingly forgive and forget all her shortcomings if the decencies of life would permit me.'

'But they will not, brother!' exclaimed Miss Lyson. 'If you were to submit in silence to your wrongs, you would scarcely be received in society again—certainly not with your wife.'

'I think I must be guided by circumstances,' said Lyson. 'Only after the most searching and diligent inquiry can I take my next step, and not even then, if it would lead me into court, unless my father looks more favourably

and trustingly upon me than I fear he does at present.'

'Have I not trusted you?' said the vicar peevishly. 'Your sisters know how I have trusted and prayed for you. Be but single-hearted and true to yourself as an honourable man, and you shall not henceforth have reason to complain that you do not stand in the relation of a dear son to me. I cannot say nor hear more now; I am weary, and must have quiet and rest.'

The respect Circum had for the state of his purse obliged him to pursue a more rapid course than in his judgment he could approve. He found his room, to which he had been introduced, very comfortable, but rather noisy. Before daylight the next morning he was aroused by Nancy calling out to her maid to get up and light the fire. In her mother's time she had been the maid, but now that she had come into her property and was married, she told Jasper she would be a maid no longer,—that she was a wife, and would be a mistress, and have a maid and manage her herself. Summing up what she would have and what she would not have, by saying, 'So mind, Jasper, she's my maid, and don't you touch her.'

'You had better keep her out of my way,

then,' said Jasper, 'if she happens to be a sleepy one, or I shall have to wake her up for you.'

'No, you won't,' said Nancy, 'for I shall do that myself, so I tell you again you are not to touch her unless you want to get my monkey up.'

'All right,' cried Jasper; 'maid or no maid, monkey or no monkey, quiet's the order of the day with me.'

And so it was settled the girl was to be Nancy's maid, and very early in the morning she became aware of the fact.

Circum had, before retiring to rest on the previous evening, made some very necessary inquiries respecting the victualling department. 'It suits me best,' he said, 'while stopping in a house like yours, to board with the family. I am not very particular about my food, so that it is clean and well-dressed, and that I am sure it will be with you, seeing how clean and nice everything looks.'

'Yes, everything is clean and nice,' said Nancy; 'and so it ought to be, for you see we are just married, and almost everything is new.'

'Then I may have a knife and fork at your table?'

'What do you say, Jasper?' asked Nancy.

'Just as you like, so that we are all ready in good time.'

'My maid,' said Nancy, 'will always have everything ready in good time.'

At breakfast the next morning Circum commenced business by getting the happy couple into a general conversation about the surrounding country places and people. He found Jasper rather difficult to deal with. He was not much open to flattery, but with Nancy the case was very different. The soft modulated tones of her lodger's voice struck her as the sweetest music, and no sooner was Jasper off with his cart than he began to praise up the cottage, with the furniture, and especially the order in which it was kept, that Nancy, as she listened to him, was almost beside herself with pleasure at the idea of being the mistress of such a house.

But he soon found that he had overshot the mark, for when he would have turned the conversation to objects and persons in and about the village, he could not get Nancy's thoughts away from her beautiful cottage, and the many interesting and useful pieces of furniture it contained. 'Now, ain't this a beautiful pair of bellows hanging up here?' she said. 'I like

bellows; don't you? The fire does so blaze when you hear them go puff, puff, as you push the handle down and pull it up again. They are bran new, only cost—well, I forget what, as I let Jasper buy them, but you see they belong to me, because I gave him the money.'

'Your husband seems a good man,' said Circum, endeavouring to get her mind away from her bellows, 'but I think he would look better if he would let his beard grow.'

'Let his beard grow?' cried Nancy, with a laugh. 'Why, he's got none to grow.'

'I see,' said Circum; 'he wants a little of the Indian *creto* to help it through the skin.'

'And what stuff is that?' asked Nancy.

'The stuff, as you call it,' replied Circum, 'is used by the princes and great men of India, and is very dear. No matter how hard the skin is, it softens it and brings the hair through in no time.'

'Do you think Jasper's skin is hard?'

'Hard? yes,' replied Circum; 'I should say it is, and in its present state you might as well think of getting a hair through as pushing your needle through your fire-shovel. If it is not very hard, why doesn't the hair come through and make him look like other men?'

'And do you really think it would make

his beard grow if I could get some of it for him ?'

'Yes, in a month or two it would do wonders.'

'Well, I do like a beard,' said Nancy, 'but where can I get the Negro gingo ?'

'The Indian *creto*,' said Circum.

'Well, never mind the name, only tell me where I can get the stuff. You don't happen to have a little of it by you now, do you ?'

'Let me see,' said Circum, 'the last I had was for Prince Kissmytoes, and I think I have a little left.'

'But is it very dear ?' asked Nancy.

'Five guineas a box, but I have only a little left, and that I can let you have for a guinea.'

'A guinea!' said Nancy, 'but that's a sight of money.'

'Yes, but see what you would get for your money. Your fine young husband with a long beard, looking so much like a gentleman that you wouldn't know him in his best Sunday clothes from a prince.'

'I'll have it!' cried Nancy; 'I should like to see Jasper with a beard, and looking like a prince, that I should.'

'You shall have it. But now mind what I say to you, you must be very careful how you

use it, as perhaps your husband may object to a beard, or the shape you want it.'

'You leave that to me; I know how to manage him.'

'Well,' said Circum, 'I do not wish to interfere in such a delicate matter, but if you will take my advice, you will apply it yourself when he is quietly asleep. You see, if it is not carefully used it might get on the wrong place, and it would look strange to see it sprouting out over his nose.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared Nancy, 'so it would. Well, then, I will take your advice, and put it on myself when he is abed and asleep.'

Circum was now fairly on easy terms with Nancy, and anything he might wish to know about the people at the Hall, as far as she knew, was at his service, and he was not slow to discover that what she did not herself know she would obtain for him from her husband. Having ascertained where he could meet the nurse who took charge of Miss Montag and her brother, when they were found in the park, he made his way to the green lawn, by the side of which stood the cottage of Mrs Brown. Introducing himself as a gentleman travelling for a large firm in London, he opened

his parcel to show her some specimens of his paper.

'I hope you have not come out of your way to my cottage,' said Mrs Brown. 'I write but few letters, and I find more paper than I want in the village.'

'But then you have the trouble to go for it,' said Circum.

'No, I have a little fellow always ready for that. Why don't you go to the Hall or the school? you might have a chance of business there, with me you have none.'

'I suppose your little fellow is at his lessons now? Is the school near you?'

'About a quarter of a mile off.'

'I think I will go and see the schoolmaster. Have you any message for your boy?'

'You are not likely to see him, or know him if you do.'

'But the schoolmaster might point him out to me.'

'Well,' said Mrs Brown, 'if you should see him, please tell him that I want him to run home as soon as the school is over.'

'I will not forget,' said Circum, as he left the cottage.

In a few minutes he had introduced himself to the schoolmaster, and by his plausible

manner removed a frown from that gentleman's brow, which had gathered there when he discovered his visitor was only a commercial traveller come to pester him for orders.

'If it were not that I pity you for having to travel about on such an errand, I should not only be annoyed, but angry, at being called away from my duties.'

A few soft words, well spiced with flattery, very shortly placed him on friendly terms with the schoolmaster, who was ever ready to hear remarks on elementary schools as they exist in the present day, and suppositions of the kind of men that will arise from board school pupils.

'Do you think,' asked Circum, 'that the next generation will be as honest and religious as the present?'

'That is a question I am not prepared to answer,' said the schoolmaster; 'but, as I hear one of my most wayward pupils growing noisy, I must bid you good day.'

'By-the-bye,' said Circum, 'I nearly forgot to say that I called at a cottage down a green lane, and learnt from an old lady that she had a boy here she wished to run home as soon as school was over.'

'The very boy who is now tröublesome in his class, and if you would see what he is like, I

will send him to you. If I mistake not, you are an old schoolmaster.'

'You are not far wrong,' said Circum. 'Pray, let me see the youth, that I may compare him with some pupils who long since passed through my hands.'

'There,' said the schoolmaster, as he opened the door of a waiting-room, 'if you will take a seat I will send the boy to you.'

He was scarcely seated when, with a flushed face and fiery eye, Stephen Elvin entered the room. On seeing the white-bearded face before him, he suddenly stopped, and said,—

'Did you send for me, sir?'

'I have come from Mrs Brown,' said Circum, 'and she wished me to tell you she wants you to run home as soon as the school is over.'

'But I shall not be able,' said Stephen.

'And why not?'

'Because I shall be kept in, and for nothing too!'

'Kept-in boys generally think so, I believe,' said Circum.

'But I know it,' retorted Stephen bitterly. 'There is never a boy tumbles over a form, or gets a spot of ink on his nose, but I am fixed upon.'

'Perhaps your forms are shaky?'

'The boys are that sit upon them,' was the

quick reply, 'and tempt a fellow to give them a sly poke, but it is not always I that do it.'

'But the ink on the nose?' said Circum.

'Then why do they sit half asleep, with their eyes shut, when they ought to be at work on their lessons.'

'And so you are in disgrace for this now?

'No,' said Stephen, 'it's only because I let my slate fall on the assistant's toes.'

'Only that?'

'Well, why did he pull my ear, and call me a stupid lout?'

'That I cannot tell,' said Circum; 'but as you appear very sorry—'

'I am not a bit sorry,' said Stephen, interrupting him.

'Well, as you are wanted at home, will you thank me if I try to beg you off.'

'Yes, if you please—only don't ask me to say I am sorry.'

When the schoolmaster came in, although he made a great point of saying how difficult it was to deal with bad boys, and a great deal more to the same purpose, he was not displeased with the request for the remission of punishment, as in the present case it was not a very serious offence. Fortunately for Stephen he was not called upon at that time to return to his class. It was twelve o'clock, and out into the road

rushed the boys as soon as they were dismissed, evidently resolved to make up in noise out of doors for the enforced silence they had had to submit to within.

Having thus gained a favourable introduction to the schoolmaster, Circum without difficulty led the conversation to pupil teachers, and through them to a late one in the school, the brother of Miss Montag. On leaving the school, as he passed through the group of noisy boys, he thought, 'I have made a good beginning here. My next business is to find my way into the great house, and learn how things are proceeding there, where, as I understand from my sensible friend, Nancy, the wife of Lyson, with her father and mother, are on a visit.

'I must get acquainted with the servants, and disburden them of their knowledge of the family secrets. Then by some means or other get over to Downend, and learn from Lyson what discoveries he has made amongst his friends, and how far he is resolved to go against his wife should our first attempt to frighten the great man fail to reach his pocket in the way of accommodation.

'My nostrum for the cure of all diseases must open the great house to me; but I think I will spend a day or two upon the outworks before I commence my attack upon the interior. From the alehouse to the stable is but a step,

and once in the midst of the stablemen, I shall find a straight path to the servants' hall.'

While taking his glass of ale at the bar of the 'Lion,' with ears and eyes fully alive to all that was going on around him, one of Sir Edward's servants entered the door, and called for a glass of gin and water hot.

'Won't you come in and take a seat?' said the landlady, to whom the order was given.

'No; can't stop a minute,' said the man. 'I'm off for a drive to Downend again for more luggage.'

'Your company going to stop longer, I suppose?' said the landlady, as she was busily employed in completing the order.

'Don't know,' was the reply.

'Mr Oliver going with you?'

'No; I think not.'

'Well, now,' said the landlady, 'I was just thinking he was.'

'A bit more sugar, please. Thank you.' Having now the mixture to his taste, he said, 'Mr Oliver was going; but he has one of his bad headaches come on, so I am going alone.'

'A fine chance for me,' said the landlady, 'if I happened to be going that way.'

'And for me too,' thought Circum, 'if my

work were a little forwarder here; but I think I will go as it is.' He then said to the landlady,—

'This seems rather an awkward country to get about in. I want to go to Downend myself, and I find I must walk half the way.'

'If I fall in with you on the road,' said the man, 'I may give you a lift, but you must be off pretty sharp, or you will be behind.'

'Thank you,' said Circum; 'I am not a good walker, but I will push on as fast as I can till you overtake me.'

'All right,' said the man, 'I will look out for you.'

On his way by his lodgings, Circum called in to tell Nancy that he would not be home to dinner, but he would make up for it at tea-time. Having settled that point to their mutual satisfaction, for Nancy was very busy with her maid, and didn't want, as she said afterwards, to be bothered getting dinner for him, and her husband not at home; he struck out boldly, as if intending to walk the whole distance. He had not, however, gone a mile down the road when carriage-wheels from behind greeted his ears, and looking back he saw his friend of the alehouse rapidly approaching; but to his dismay a smart young lady was seated by his side.

'No Downend for me to-day,' he thought; 'I must find an excuse for turning back.'

'Well, you have stepped out pretty well,' said the man, as he pulled up by his side. 'I thought we should catch you before you got half as far. Jump up. You can open and shut the door yourself.'

And Circum found to his surprise and pleasure that the vehicle was not a mere trap, but a light waggonette, made to carry four persons more or less, according to the amount of luggage they had with them.

The horse was fresh, the road good, and the air bracing, so onward they went right merrily. The young lady proved to be one of the housemaids from the Hall, who was going for a ride to Downend. Circum sat very comfortably within speaking and hearing distance of his companions. But after the driver had said, 'Are you all right?' and put the horse in motion, they appeared to pay little or no attention to him, but chatted on together with the ease and freedom of old friends.

Circum soon learnt the position the girl held in the Hall, and immediately concluded that he had accidentally fallen upon a piece of good luck. To look over the inside of a house, and get a plan of its domestic arrangements, without

going into it, is always amusing, and unaccompanied with danger,' he thought, 'so just to wear away the time, if for no more profitable purpose, I will try and sketch on my brain the interior of the enemy's castle.'

'Who have you got in your post this afternoon?' he heard the man say.

'No one,' replied the girl. 'I was up early, and did all I could myself; and I expect I shall have a good deal to do when I get back again.'

'Do your visitors make you much work?'

'Not much downstairs. The rooms there are always open and used, company or no company.'

'The school-room is upstairs, I think?'

'Yes, it is,' said the girl; 'and I wish it was anywhere else. It is too near the best bedroom, and causes a good deal of running up and down stairs.'

'Why, how's that?'

'Why, because our visitors are too fond of going there.'

'And does that make it bad for you?'

'Yes; they carry up a heap of dust, and I don't like it. Then there is Sir Edward's room close by, and he is often up there; and I don't think it is right when there are ladies about.'

'But you don't think there's anything wrong going on, do you?'

'Well, I don't know,' said the girl;' 'there may be and there may not be, but that's no business of mine.'

'Nor of mine either,' said the man, 'though it might be if it were a storey or two higher, and I had the run of the house like Sir Edward.'

'Oh yes, I dare say it would,' said the girl, with a hearty laugh.

A slight accident happening to a part of the harness caused the driver to pull up, and jump down from his seat to put it right. Circum took advantage of the incident to stand up, and, while holding on to the rail at the back of her seat, to ask the maid if she was not afraid to be left there alone.

'Afraid!' replied the girl; 'no, I should think not, when I have the reins in my hand, and can see Jim at the horse's head.'

The mishap was soon repaired, and they were in motion again. Circum remained in his standing posture, and took part in the conversation that ensued, and so well did he employ the half-an-hour that elapsed before he asked the driver to put him down, that he had seen the interior of the Hall fully exposed to view, and

some incidents that might lately have occurred there registered in his mind.

'If I want to return presently,' he said to the driver, as he handed him a shilling, 'could you help me on my way?'

'Yes,' was the reply, 'if I can pick you up on the road a little way from Downend.'

CHAPTER IV.

'I MUST manage to see Lyson alone to-day,' thought Circum, as he walked on towards the church which he saw in the distance. 'I have no time to waste upon introduction to his father or sisters.' Inquiring of a youth who was at work in a ditch by the side of the road for the vicarage, he learned from him that the gentleman he was in quest of had just gone along towards the church.

'You will greatly oblige me,' said Circum, 'if you will run and tell him that a gentleman wishes to speak to him—one who has had a long walk and is tired. While you are gone I have an odd sixpence somewhere in my pocket which I will look out for you.'

'All right, sir,' said the youth, 'I'll soon catch him.'

In a few minutes the two men were in con-

fidential conversation, walking across a field to a secluded spot where they might talk for hours without any fear of interruption from a third party. They had, of course, much to tell each other of their movements since they parted on the pier at Boulogne.

Lyson could not restrain the expression of his surprise at the appearance of his friend. 'I cannot understand how you have managed to keep up so well upon the little I was able to give you. Your beard is well trimmed, your clothes and boots good, and you look as fresh and well as ever.'

'You may well be surprised,' said Circum, 'if you think I have had nothing but the few pounds you gave me to depend on.'

'You have not been engaging in any new enterprise?' said Lyson suspiciously. 'You know my affairs are to be finished before you engage in any other?'

'You can have no reason to doubt my honesty?'

'I hope not,' said Lyson. 'But where did your money come from?'

By way of answer Circum related the incident of his meeting with an old friend at Folkestone, and from thence on to his journey to London, with the discovery he made by the

way, summing up with his going to Woodfield, and the progress he had made in his business there, and his intended journey to Bath, 'and now,' he added, 'since you are acquainted with my adventures, perhaps you will give me some account of yours?'

'They are few and soon told,' said Lyson. 'I stopped at Boulogne until I was sick and tired of the place, and so I finished up by sending my second letter to my amiable father-in-law, and set out on my voyage for this place, where I find everything as stale as a fish that has not seen the water for a week. Mr and Mrs Cresswell with my wife, I dare say you know, are at Woodcome Hall enjoying the hospitality and wot not—well, I will not say of whom, lest the word should cling to my throat with a curse attached to it, and choke me.'

'Enough, I understand,' said Circum; 'but now about financial matters? I hope they are looking up with you, for the gold pieces I had from my friend at Folkestone have nearly all taken wings to themselves, and gone I don't know where.'

'I have turned up little more than a blank since I have been here,' replied Lyson. 'Words, words, words in abundance, but little gold. Only twenty pounds have I been able to draw from

my father, and they fell into my hands warm with his tears. Poor old fellow; if I did not mean to make it all up to him one of these days, I think I should begin to be a little ashamed of myself.'

'And now,' said Circum, 'how about the future business? How stand you affected to your wife? Do you mean to go forward against her in earnest for a divorce, or will you simply hold on to the baronet and bleed him for playing with her?'

'You treat the matter very lightly,' said Lyson angrily.

'And how otherwise would you have me treat it,' retorted Circum. 'Do you want me to say I pity you for having been so vilely injured, and all that sort of thing? If you do I can only say you are very much mistaken. We have known each other too well for any chance of sentimentality flourishing between us, and in one shape or the other without hesitation the word must be—forward.'

'But suppose I should not choose to go forward?'

'Then I should leave a fool behind me; but enough of this, I know what you mean perhaps better than you do yourself. We must go forward, and that I may not be backward in my

part you must hand me ten of the twenty pounds you have in hand?'

'I cannot spare so much.'

'And why not?' asked Circum. 'What use can you have for money here but to forward the scheme we are both engaged in? Are you not as much interested in what I have to do as what you have to do yourself? and while you are living in free quarters with your father, and I have to pay to the last farthing for my daily wants. How can I hold on without the sinews of war? But if you are tired of the game of getting square with the baronet, that is another thing.'

'But I am not tired,' said Lyson moodily.

'I should have made a great mistake if you had been,' rejoined Circum; 'and I will never believe, unless you tell me so yourself, that you are willing to let your rival feel that he has beaten you at every point; that you are content, in fact, to see him as close as may be to your wife, and—'

'Here,' cried Lyson, 'take the money, and save the arrow you are pointing at me for the heart of the enemy. You know I hate the man, and that I shall look upon him humbled at my feet as the greatest blessing the gods can bestow upon me.'

'And the wife?' said Circum.

'I have done with her, or she has done with me, which, I suppose, is about the same thing,' replied Lyson; 'and whether she is brought down with him, or through the influence of her father's money holds her head shamelessly aloft, is a matter of indifference to me.'

'That is well,' said Circum; 'now, I see you plainly, and not through the cloud that that paltry ten pounds was bringing between us.'

'I never by any chance,' said Lyson, 'get an extra few pounds, but some one takes a good share of them from me.'

'We have no time to talk of that now,' said Circum. 'I must be back in Woodfield to night, but before I go I should like to have the object of my coming definitely settled Once more I must ask you, Do you want to get rid of your wife for ever, or will your attack upon her be only to open the purse-strings of the great man?'

'Why do you pest me with such a stupid question? You know I want money, and if I can get that, and revenge at the same time, so much the better; but revenge alone, although it might be very sweet, would be profitless.'

'Then when we have made a little more sure of our outworks, how shall we commence the

attack? I am bound to worry the great man considerably about his property, and if he will not bleed freely, he will find my claimant is not a man of straw. But, for the wife, I suppose you will take her in hand?'

'What!—see her and talk to her?' cried Lyson.

'Only through your solicitor.'

'Oh, is that all?' said Lyson, considerably relieved.

'Now, then,' said Circum, 'I think we understand each other, and I may set out on my return to Woodfield, and from thence to Bath.'

'You seem to have all the work at present.'

'And yet you hesitated about having it done for such a trifle! But you need not be altogether idle here. I dare say there are some old gossips at Downend as well as at Woodfield, who have seen certain things passing between the lady and gentleman they did not think quite right, and may have seen a great deal more if you can assist their imaginations a little.'

'I will set my sisters to look after them; they are first rate at a bit of scandal.'

'Have you the letters in your pocket you spoke to me about?'

'Yes; they are all right and safe.'

'If you will let me take them with me to Woodfield, I will insure you a thousand pounds for them.'

'I would rather keep them myself, thank you.'

'Well, as you please,' said Circum.

'What use could you make of them at Woodfield?'

'If I should get an introduction to the great man, I might let him see they had not been destroyed.'

'I can do that myself.'

'I only meant to forward your work a little. I think you will do well to let me have them.'

'Well, you shall have them then, but you will return them to me very soon.'

'Oh yes,' said Circum; 'because you will want them to show your solicitor.'

'Mind, it is all above board,' said Lyson, as he hesitatingly placed them in the hands of his confederate.

'My life for their safe keeping,' said Circum.

The interview having been thus pleasantly concluded, Circum felt armed afresh for the business before him; and having obtained some slight refreshment at a roadside public, was taken up in the little carriage and driven rapidly back to Woodfield.

On his reaching his lodgings he found Nancy in high spirits, and full of talk. Her husband had reached home satisfied with his day's work, and resolved to be pleased with everything set before him, while the maid had been all that a maid should be in the hands of a good, sensible, and active mistress. The kettle was bubbling on the hob, and a good, substantial tea set out upon the table. The cat sat singing in her sleep before the fire, while the dog, after his long run with the cart having had his supper, lay with open eyes by her side, as if greatly interested in her song.

'This is all nice, isn't it?' said Nancy.

'Capital,' said Jasper, making an onslaught on the thickly-buttered toast.

Circum followed the lead, and appeared to have a good share in the general comfort and happiness, of which, as the reader knows, he was totally unworthy. He was in excellent spirits. The ten additional pounds in his pocket made him feel so strong and well. He knew that with money, go where he might he would be welcome, and knowing that, he gave himself up to the enjoyment of the present, without one disturbing thought of the future.

After going to his room before he closed his eyes in sleep he had the business of the morrow

all clearly mapped out upon his brain. He had heard of the illness of the old steward, and also learnt that he had been in the family for many years—that he had travelled on the Continent with the late Sir Henry; and the idea dawned upon his mind that he must be an old acquaintance, with whom it would be to his interest without loss of time to obtain an interview.

He was a light sleeper, and the slightest noise at any time of the night was sufficient to arouse him. To add to the chance of his rest being broken, the thin lath and plaster walls separating the bedrooms permitted the sound of voices to be heard from one room in the other. But it was no mere talking that awoke him the next morning just before daybreak. At first he was under the impression that the bride and bridegroom had been amusing themselves by a fight in their sleep, and that on awakening, under the influence of their excited feelings, they had continued the battle in right earnest.

'I didn't touch you,' he heard Nancy say, 'so don't you tell me that I did. I must light the candle, mustn't I, to get the maid a light? I couldn't trust her with the matches, could I?'

'Well,' cried Jasper, 'if you must light the candle,' you needn't go and let the grease run all over

In his reaching his lodgings he found H
s high spirits and full of talk. Her h
had reached home satisfied with his day
and resolved to be pleased with everyt
before him, while the maid had been
said she'd be in the hands of a good
and brave mistress. The kettle was
on the hob, and a good substantial
over the table. The cat sat sing
sleep before the fire, while the dome
long run with the cart having had
by with open eyes by her side,
interested in her song.

"This s
"Capital," said Jasper, making
on the thick-buttered toast.

Susan followed the lead, and
to a good share in the gener
happiness, of which, as the re
was totally unworthy. He
spirits. The
pocket mak
knew that
would be
himself
without

dy mapped out upon his brain. He had
f the illness of the old steward, and also
t he had been in the family for many
t he had travelled on the Continent
e Sir Henry; and the idea dawned
d that he must be an old acquaint
hom it would be to his interest
time to obtain an interview,
ight sleeper, and the slightest
ne of the night was sufficient
To add to the disturbance of his

y.
st.'
on
ards
f that
aware
e ques-
t at all
l that if
wife, not-
contrary,
he did not
l if he ever
ounds from
lucky fellow.
al with a man
e,' he thought,
d him firmly to
he old steward,
spect he will, an
may join hands,

my face. If you don't give me something to get it off with, I'll wipe it all off on the sheet.'

'You do, you do,' said Nancy, 'and make the clean sheets all over grease, and see what will happen.'

'Why, you said you hadn't dropped any on my face. How can I make the sheets greasy if you didn't? but we shall see.'

Then, as far as Circum could understand, a struggle took place in the next room, Jasper grasping the sheet to get the abnoxious grease from his face, and Nancy tugging at it to get it out of his hands. Satisfied at length that he had freed himself from the pollution, Jasper gave up the contention, saying, 'I shall have the blanket then,' in which he rolled himself up to finish his night's rest, while Nancy was heard shaking out the sheet to get it smooth again. 'I expect,' she thought, as she did so, 'he's rubbed some of it off, but if he has, and his beard comes up patchy, I must get some more stuff and touch up the bare places. What a pity I let the cold candlestick touch his nose and wake him up!'

Shortly afterwards, on her first meeting with her lodger, she whispered in his ear,—

'I did it!—I did it! but I am afraid he rubbed some of it off. Have you got any more?'

'Not a bit,' replied Circum.

'Oh dear,' said Nancy, 'what shall I do? for if it comes up patchy, his chin will look like the back of a distempered dog! But don't you say a word about it.'

'Of course not,' said Circum. 'But shall I send for a five-guinea box?'

'That is such a lot of money,' said Nancy. 'I think I'll wait and see how it comes up first.'

Breakfast over, Circum left the cottage on his tour of inspection. As he went on towards the Hall, he could not disguise from himself that he felt a little anxious. He was fully aware that he was engaged in two very delicate questions with a confederate who was not at all times to be trusted. He was satisfied that if Lyson could come to terms with his wife, notwithstanding what he might say to the contrary, he would quickly let him know that he did not want his assistance any longer; and if he ever succeeded in getting another ten pounds from him, he would be an uncommonly lucky fellow. It was not pleasant to have to deal with a man of such a character. 'I must strike,' he thought, 'while the iron is hot, and hold him firmly to decisive action. I must see the old steward, and if he should prove, as I suspect he will, an old acquaintance of mine, we may join hands,

as we have done before, over a little quiet business, and no one but ourselves be the wiser for it. The stakes are large, and I must throw boldly for them. If I gain I will play the rich man again, but if I fail disappear as soon as possible.'

Presenting himself at the servants' entrance at the Hall, he asked for the girl who had ridden with him to Downend yesterday. He had, by describing her to Jasper and Nancy, managed to get her name for his present purpose.

'Ah! good morning,' said the girl on seeing him. 'But how in the name of goodness did you know my name?'

'A little bird told me. And now I want you to do me a favour.'

'It mustn't keep me long from my work, for I am very busy.'

'It will not take you five minutes,' said Circum. 'I heard you say yesterday how much your steward was suffering from the gout. Now, as I happen to have a cure for the complaint, I want you to get him to see me.'

'But I have no business near him,' said the girl; 'and every one who has is afraid to go to him, unless he rings.'

'That is very unfortunate.'

'Well, you were civil to me yesterday, and I

will be civil to you to-day. I will go and knock at his door. But who shall I say wants to see him?'

'A physician from London.'

'A physician! Oh my,' said the girl, 'if I had known that before I should have been afraid of you.'

'Come in,' cried the old steward in answer to the girl's knock at his door. After learning the cause of her appearance, he said,—

'Some scamp of a travelling doctor, I suppose; but he will be a clever fellow if he gets me to take any of his stuff. Tell him to come in.'

'He is such a nice old gentleman,' said the girl.

'Go along, you young fool!' growled the old man. As Circum entered the room, he continued,—'So you think you have a cure for the gout, do you? There, that will do; stop where you are. Don't come near me; you are full of physic! I can smell you at this distance!'

Circum looked searchingly at the old cripple before him, who sat in his arm-chair bolstered up on either side, and his right leg resting on a footstool.

'Well,' said Lea, 'what do you want? Don't talk about curing the gout, because you know you can't do it.'

'Perhaps,' replied Circum, 'you will change your opinion if you will let me look at your foot.'

'Are you from a London hospital?'

'No, I am from Germany.'

'Are there many hospitals there,' asked Lea, 'where they cure the gout?'

'I think I may say "Yes;" and if you knew under whom I studied you—'

'I can guess,' cried Lea; 'if he was not a quack he was something worse, if he said he could cure the gout.'

'His death caused deep mourning to many a sufferer.'

'Oh, he's dead, is he?'

'Yes; he died about twenty years ago, and I have his recipe.'

'But you haven't met with any one fool enough to take the stuff you make up?'

'Yes, I have—in Germany.'

'What do I care about Germany? Tell me what you have done in England.'

'You have been in Germany?'

'Yes, and in many other countries too.'

'I met you there!'

'Met me there! Then who the devil are you?'

'Listen, and I will tell you!' replied Circum,

moving suddenly across the room to him, and whispering some words in his ear.

The old steward shrank back in his chair, while a death-like hue overspread his face, and a shiver as of an ague ran through his frame.

'Don't be alarmed,' said Circum; 'I am come to you as a friend.'

'I am a wretched, miserable man!' groaned Lea; 'I thought you were long ago in your grave! What do you want?'

'To talk to you a little of old times.'

'And then to rob me!'

'Do I look like a robber? I tell you I come as a friend, to take away the curse that has been clinging to you for the last twenty years!'

'You have come to rob me,' groaned Lea; 'but there is help at hand, and I will call for it.'

'Hush, hush!' said Circum, 'you have nothing to fear from me. It is from yourself that mischief will come, if it comes at all. Twenty years since you bribed me to keep out of the way, when my presence would have been very inconvenient for the furtherance of your scheme.'

'Why bring up that old story again?'

'That you may have an opportunity of undoing the wrong you then accomplished. Did

you forget, when your old master died, that he had a grandson living? Not you. You knew it well, but you were silent, for reasons best known to yourself.'

'He was not legitimate.'

'I say he was, and I will prove it, unless you can devise some other means of settling the affair. The mother, I know, is dead, and that also you know. The poor, injured girl died, I believe, in your presence, I might almost say in your arms.'

'You are wrong,' said Lea, 'I did not see her here alive. It was my son who met her in the park.'

'But you saw her afterwards. You, the only person who knew who she was, and you stood by with a closed mouth, and saw her buried as a pauper, and her two children put out to nurse as the children of a beggar.'

'I helped to keep them from the union.'

'And to get them educated suitable to their natural position,' retorted Circum sarcastically. 'But enough of this. I am here to prove that the youth now at Bath is the rightful heir to the family estate.'

'And have you told the boy this?'

'No, you are the only one to whom I have yet spoken on the subject. Now, tell me, shall

we be friends, and endeavour to settle the affair to our mutual satisfaction.'

'But, if the boy is the rightful heir, what can we say or do?'

'Much, if we meet with opposition, even to the extent of throwing the whole property into the hands of the lawyers. By mutual concession this may be obviated. The present possessor and the heir may come to terms, and reward us for not pushing matters to extremities.'

'You do not expect me to give you an answer to your proposition on the instant?' said Lea. 'I can hardly understand what you have been saying to me.'

'Shall I say it over again?'

'No, no; I must try and think of it when you are gone! I cannot now; I am weary to death with hearing you talk.'

'I will give you until to-morrow, but no longer,' said Circum. 'I am here for work, and you shall help me, willingly or unwillingly, which you choose.'

'You cannot make me say that is true which is not true.'

'But I can make you speak the truth, and that will be enough for me. I must see you again to-morrow, and here is a box of ointment

which will serve for an excuse for me to call to inquire how you are. I am not quite sure that you will feel any effect from it, good or bad, but such as it is it is at your service.'

'Stop one moment,' said Lea. 'The youth is not of age; who is to act for him?'

'That will be my case,' said Circum.

'What right can you have to act for him?'

'That of being his nearest relative on his mother's side.'

'You his nearest relative!'

'Yes; that is the fact you will have to deal with if you go to the opposite side, and upon that I bid you good-bye till to-morrow,' saying which he left the room.

CHAPTER V.

THE sisters of Lyson were greatly exercised in their minds when they attempted to discover what, under the circumstances in which they found themselves placed, it was their duty to do. They could not fail to perceive that their father's opinion was not in direct accord with their own respecting their brother. But then their father was old, timid in mind, and weak in body. They could not expect him to do much, but at least he might advise with Claypole, and by that means help him to a correct judgment of his present very disagreeable position.

But he seemed purposely to avoid speaking to him before them on the subject. Why was this? they argued, when alone. If Edith's conduct has been such that our brother cannot look upon her any longer as his wife, measures

must be taken for her punishment, and to free him from her vile bondage. What could they do to help their brother.

Should they speak to their father, and urge him to see Mr Cresswell on their brother's behalf. The two gentlemen could talk over the matter together. Even Mr Cresswell could not support his daughter in wrong-doing. It was most unfortunate that they were at Woodfield at this time. Had they been at home, the vicar might have managed to get to Elston Court; but how was it possible he could go to see him now? They expected, if they proposed that he should go to hear him, say the journey would be enough to kill him.

They could not ask him to go, but they might entreat him to write, and entreat him they did very earnestly, but without succeeding in their object, and it soon became evident to them that he had resolved not to take an active part in the matter, which was now daily becoming more engrossing to them.

'You talk to me,' said the vicar, 'as if I was young, and your brother a little thoughtless child. Do you suppose he cannot think for himself, and decide upon the course he ought to take in an affair in which he is so deeply concerned. What could I and twenty Mr

Cresswells do between him and his wife, if they were not disposed to agree together? If he judges his wife unworthy of his name, let him say so, and take effectual means to free himself from all further annoyance on her account. If he believes, as I do, that she is guiltless of any great offence, then let him address a letter to her or her father for the restoration of their confidence.'

'You are very hard upon poor Claypole,' said Miss Lyson.

'And I say papa is very cruel too,' added Dorothy.

'Well, well,' said the vicar, 'you seem to have but a very sad opinion of your father, but I trust I am not so unfeeling or so little aware of my duty as you would make it appear. Go to your brother, and tell him what I have said; perhaps you may find that he will judge more correctly of me than you are disposed to do.'

'But, papa—' began Miss Lyson.

'I cannot listen to you any longer now,' said the vicar, 'I have some writing to do which I am hardly equal to,—you must please leave me.'

The sisters retired greatly disappointed and dissatisfied with the result of the interview. Fortunately they did not meet with their brother

for two or three hours afterwards, or they might have indulged in some not very filial words towards their father. They did not, however, look upon the battle as over. At the very first opportunity they would renew the attack, and they hoped with better success. It was all very well for Claypole to go on from day to day idling away the time fishing in the river or prowling about the country instructing the villagers in their various duties. But, though he was willing thus to sacrifice himself for the sake of peace and quiet, it was not for them to see him suffer from injustice without raising their voices against it.

Besides getting their father to interest himself more actively in the matter, they proposed other plans to accomplish their purpose of bringing their doubts to a conclusion. One of which, in a short time, became very prominent. It was no other than that they should get a carriage to take them over to Woodfield, and obtain a private interview with Mrs Cresswell. They would not venture on the gentleman again, remembering as they did, with burning cheeks, the rebuff they had met with on a former occasion. Yes, they would see Mrs Cresswell, and appeal to her as a Christian woman to assist them in bringing the unfortunate estrangement

between their brother and his wife to a close, one way or the other. If we can only get them to meet, and Edith can prove, to her husband's satisfaction, that she has done him no wrong, all may yet be well, and we may be very friendly together again. But, on the other hand, if she cannot prove her innocence, he must proceed against her and Sir Edward for damages. Anything will be better for Claypole than his present state of uncertainty.

Having matured their plan, the next morning, without a word of their purpose to either their father or brother, they set out on their self-imposed mission. 'I do believe,' said Miss Lyson, as they approached the Hall, 'that there is not a single soul at home. The old place is as quiet and dull as it was in Sir Henry's time.' They were, however, happily mistaken. The lady they wished to see they found alone in the drawing-room, but in a few words they learnt she was not likely to be so long. Charlotte and Miss Gordon, escorted by Oliver, were expected in immediately, and Sir Edward, with Mr Cresswell and Edith very shortly afterwards.

'There is no time to be lost,' whispered Dorothy.

Miss Lyson gave her a look, as much as to

say, you simpleton, I know it; and then said, in the softest tones her voice was capable of, 'We come to tell you, dear Mrs Cresswell, that our dear brother Claypole is paying us a visit.'

'Indeed!' said Mrs Cresswell.

'And we are all so sorry you are from home,' she continued; 'and I know he is too; but why he does not come over here to see you I cannot tell.'

'He is quite well, I trust?' said Mrs Cresswell coldly.

'Oh yes, quite well; but oh, so changed from his long years of suffering that you would scarcely know him again. I do wish you could see him; I know you would pity him.'

'I have pitied him many times.'

'That is very kind of you.'

'I have pitied him,' she continued, 'when I have known that he was turning all the blessings by which he was surrounded into curses, and rendering his friends, as far as he could, miserable.'

'Oh! my dear Mrs Cresswell, you must not believe the envious and malicious things that have been said about him. I assure you they are not true. I know he has in some way offended Mr Cresswell, and that is the reason why he has not been over to see you, I suppose.'

'I think I can give you a better reason,' rejoined Mrs Cresswell; 'years since, when his presence in England would have covered his friends with disgrace, Mr Cresswell allowed him a pension, to be continued as long as he remained out of England. If he is, as you say, at Downend now, he has forfeited his claim to it.'

'Oh! Mrs Cresswell, are you not very cruel? Was it not his duty to come over and see his father before he died?'

'Had he performed his duty, he would have come while his father was well, and have helped to keep him so.'

'But if he had promised not to come?'

'I mean long before he was called upon to make that promise.'

'If I could induce you to ask him to come over and see you, I should be so very glad; I am sure it would lead you to have a better opinion of him than you have now.'

'I cannot ask him to come here.'

'Then will you see him at Downend?'

'Certainly not alone. I will mention your request to Mr Cresswell, and if he will go home for the purpose, I will accompany him.'

'And Edith?'

'That I cannot answer for,' replied Mrs

Cresswell, in a manner which made it clear that she considered the conversation should close there.

'Oh! do try, please, and persuade,' began Dorothy, when her speech was cut short by the entrance of Charlotte, Miss Gordon, and Oliver.

'Oh, Charlotte!' cried, Miss Lyson, 'I am so glad to see you looking so well, and you, Miss Gordon, and you also, Oliver. Why, I declare you are all looking the picture of health and happiness.'

'We have had enough to make us look very sad this morning,' said Charlotte.

'Visiting the poor has a very depressing effect,' said Miss Lyson. 'Seeing their unthrifty habits makes one very sad.'

'We have little reason to complain of our poor,' said Charlotte.

'No; they are all very good,' observed Oliver.

'A sad accident has happened,' said Charlotte, 'near the village; a bridge crossing the stream has broken down under a heavy laden cart, and the driver, and two children who were passing at the time, have been very seriously injured.'

'Were you there?' asked Dorothy of Oliver.

'No; thank goodness,' replied Oliver. 'I was not.'

'You would make a poor soldier, I think,' said Dorothy.

'There would be no soldiers if every one were of my mind,' replied Oliver.

The company was now increased by the return of the walking party, and the two sisters found themselves very awkwardly situated in the midst of what they could but consider a hostile group, if not undisguised enemies. But they were not easily abashed, and therefore, as soon as the morning greeting was over with the new comers, they returned to the business that had brought them there.

'I have been telling Mrs Cresswell,' said Miss Lyson, 'that we have a visitor at Downend, and that we are all so sorry you are from home.'

Edith, foreseeing what was coming, gave a beseeching look to her father and left the room.

'What difference our being at home or not at home would make to your visitor I could not readily imagine,' observed Mr Cresswell, 'had I not heard who your visitor is.'

'You have heard of Claypole's arrival, then?'

'Yes,' replied Mr Cresswell; 'and if you were a gentleman I should tell you, that was all I cared to hear about it. But as it is, I

will leave you to imagine my feelings on the subject when I tell you that his coming has brought no pleasure with it to this house—I beg your pardon, I mean my house.'

'Perhaps,' said Miss Lyson bitterly, 'it would be well to put the two houses as one.'

'As you please,' retorted Mr Cresswell; 'I will answer for myself, that I trust our houses may never be less pleasantly connected than they are at present.'

'Am I then to understand,' said Miss Lyson, 'that it is your wish my brother should know you have no desire to see him?'

'Yes, or to hear from him either,' said Mr Cresswell.

'Then he must appeal to the law,' put in Dorothy.

'As he or you please,' rejoined Mr Cresswell.

'Very well,' said Miss Lyson. 'We put ourselves to the trouble and expense of coming over to see Mrs Cresswell, in the hope that through her you might be brought to reason, but since we have failed in that we must return home and consult with our friends on what we have yet in our power to do. We wish you good morning.'

'Good morning,' said Mr Cresswell, and turned away.

'Poor souls!' said Sir Edward as they left the room; 'you must permit me to pity them that they have not a more worthy object to fight so bravely for.'

'They make me quite angry,' said Mr Cresswell, 'by the resolute manner in which they close their eyes against the truth.'

'Hark! there is the luncheon-bell,' said Oliver, 'and I am very glad to hear it, for my walk has made me hungry.'

'You did not eat any of your cakes,' said Miss Gordon.

'No,' replied Oliver; 'but I was tempted to eat one.'

'And I know which one,' cried Grace, who had just made her appearance from her lessons.

'Do you?' said Oliver; 'then just tell me if you can.'

'It was the one I saw Miss Gordon put in your basket after breakfast this morning. I saw you looking quite hungry at it then,—yes, even before it had left her hand.'

'Now, Grace,' said Oliver, 'if you make me such a hungry creature you will make every one afraid of me.'

'For fear you should prove a cannibal and eat them,' said Grace.

'Good news!' exclaimed Sir Edward, after

having very eagerly opened a telegram that a servant presented to him as they were on their way to the dining-room. 'Jesse has reached London, and will soon be on his way to our station. Order the carriage to be at the door directly,' he said to the servant. 'Some of us must go to meet him.'

'I will go, if you please,' said Oliver.

'If my friends could spare me,' said Sir Edward, 'I think I should like to go myself also.'

'Oh, do let me go!' cried Grace; 'and Edith, too,—I see her just coming downstairs, and looking as if a ride would do her good.'

'No,' said Edith; 'you must please excuse me. I am tired with my morning's walk.'

'Then I shall be the only lady!' exclaimed Grace.

'But who said you might go?' asked Sir Edward.

'You looked as if you meant me to go,' said Grace; 'and now I am sure you did. How glad I shall be to see Jesse after his long absence, and I know he will to see me.'

It was not only to greet Jesse at the station that had determined Sir Edward to take his place in the carriage with Oliver and Grace. He saw how greatly Mr Cresswell had been

disturbed by their late visitors, and he knew if he remained in the house with them the subject would again come before him, which at the present time he was most anxious it should not do.

This did not arise from a want of sympathy, but rather from an excess of it. He felt so strongly how gross and cruel the conduct of Lyson had been that he could not think of him without an angry flush crossing his brain that was allied to a feeling little short of murderous; and to speak of him while under such influence he felt would be most undesirable, and besides that, he was willing that his guests should be left to themselves for a while to talk over the unpleasant matter, and form their opinion upon it.

A stranger passing by the dining-room window while the luncheon was in progress would have had little idea that aching hearts filled the breasts of the greater part of the company, so joyous and happy did they all appear,—when in truth their chief business was an endeavour each one to disguise his real feelings from his neighbour. Grace was the only one, it is to be feared, who was quite free from dissimulation. Charlotte and Miss Gordon looked anxiously at their elders to observe the effect the late un-

pleasant scene had had upon them, and Oliver, through his natural timidity, shrank within himself when he thought of the angry looks of the sisters as they left the room, and yet they all laughed and talked as if their hearts were quite at ease.

Undisguised was the emotion with which Jesse and his father greeted each other at the station, and earnest and hearty the welcome of Oliver and Grace. Jesse's absence had continued many days longer than was expected, and during the latter portion of it had occasioned his father much anxiety.

Sir Edward had consented to his son going to Germany from the very opposite motive to that which had taken such a strong hold upon the mind of Jesse. He had reasoned with himself, as we have seen, on the supposition that the love of the young people was but of a transitory nature, and that if they were kept apart for a time, moving about amongst strangers in the midst of strange scenes, with the changing incidents that would be constantly occurring, this childish dream of love would pass away, and leave not the trace of a sigh or tear behind.

Nor did he even, when Jesse's silence caused him to be anxious, in the least change his

opinion; on the contrary, he began to fear that his antidote was doing more than he had intended it should do. That the scenes through which his son was passing had supplied him with new friends as fond of foreign travel as himself, the tendency of which would be to revive his early desire to visit the little known regions of Central Africa.

On one occasion, when Jesse was obliged to apply for further means to prosecute his inquiries, his father, acting on the idea that was then prominent in his mind, had but sparingly supplied his necessities, that he might in some measure control the movements of his body, if he could not those of his mind; but before the carriage had cleared a mile of the road between the station and Woodfield, he discovered his mistake.

After reaching the Hall, and receiving the welcome that there awaited him, Jesse observed that as he had spent more money than he calculated upon doing, and had also left a few unsettled claims behind him, he thought, while the matter was fresh in his mind, he should be glad if his father could give him a few minutes to go over the particulars with him.

'We will not trouble about them now,' said

Sir Edward. 'I dare say you have not made me quite a bankrupt.'

'There are two or three notes I promised to send off directly on reaching home,' said Jesse.

Sir Edward could offer no objection to this, though he retired somewhat unwillingly to the library. As soon as the bills, of which Jesse had spoken, had been satisfactorily dealt with, Sir Edward proposed that they should put the other papers away and return to their friends.

'Before we do so,' began Jesse in a tremulous voice, 'I think I ought to tell you more fully than I have yet done, the chief object I had in view when I obtained your sanction for setting out on my late journey. I told you it was—if I could verify Lea's statement—to try and discover if he had passed over any incident as unworthy of notice which might give me the clue he had in vain sought for.'

Sir Edward, doubtful of the answer he could make, contented himself with bending his head in approval, when Jesse continued,—

'On reaching the point from whence his statement took its departure, I found he had left no trace behind him, and I was, after much trouble and loss of time, led to believe that his statement had no foundation in truth.'

'Do you mean,' asked Sir Edward, 'to say

that the account Lea brought back to us was false?'

'I can only say,' replied Jesse, 'that if he really passed over the ground he said he did, he left no trace behind him; and that I have since proved that the point he said he started from was not likely to lead him to any discovery worth making.'

'We will have his answer to this,' said Sir Edward.

The ice was now fairly broken, and Jesse's nervousness gradually disappeared as he went on with his narrative. When he spoke of what he had heard at Brighton, his father stopped him with the inquiry of,—

'Why did you not tell me of that at the time?'

'Could I have met with the gentlemen again,' said Jesse, 'I would have gladly done so; but as it was, I thought the information would amount to nothing unless I could substantiate it. Then it was that an overmastering desire took possession of my soul that I should go to Germany and find out the secret myself; and I have done it!' he added triumphantly. 'And now I know that the statement I heard at Brighton was substantially correct.' He then ran hastily over the incidents of his travel.

'You have brought me a surprising account of facts, of which, up to this morning, I had no knowledge,' said Sir Edward. 'I will not attempt to disguise from you that I think they are most important, and must not be passed over in silence. Whether the marriage you speak of was legal or not, it appears to me, at the first glance, that it cannot very much alter the real state of the case. If the poor girl thought the marriage was legal and it was not, we can only think of her with pity.' Then, after a slight pause, he added,—'It is a question upon which an opinion must not be hastily formed. I understand the moral obligation that is cast upon me, but whether it should be dealt with publicly or privately as a family matter, I am not prepared to say. I will speak to Mr Cresswell, and with him question Lea to see what more can be learnt from him.'

'I shall be sorry,' observed Jesse, 'if I have brought trouble upon our house, but I was urged forward by an impulse I could not resist.'

'Trouble is not disgrace,' said Sir Edward, 'though we need be careful that it does not lead to it by any misapprehension of our duty.'

'And, father,' said Jesse falteringly, 'may I ask you one question,—I see by your smile that I may. Will you tell me if you have

heard from Miss Montag since you took her to London?'

'Not from her, but of her.'

'And is she well?'

'Quite well, I believe.'

'May I see her,' gasped Jesse.

'My dear boy,' replied his father, 'I know not what to say. The changed position, with respect to her, in which I so suddenly find myself, deprives me almost of thought. Before I take one step in advance of what I have done, I must speak to Mr Cresswell. Go you to your room and have some refreshment brought to you there, while I consult with our mutual friend. Can you trust to our guidance?'

'I will endeavour to do so.'

'Then all may yet be well,' said Sir Edward.

CHAPTER VI.

THE rage which ran riot in the minds and words of the sisters on leaving Woodfield had not exhausted itself on their reaching the vicarage at Downend. Disappointed, hungry, and tired they rushed into their father's room and inquired with breathless haste for their brother.

'I do not know where he is,' said the vicar. 'Where have you been?'

'To Woodfield!' they both exclaimed, as with one impulse.

'And for what purpose?'

'How can you ask such a question?' cried Miss Lyson; 'for what purpose could we go there but to serve Claypole. You would not make an attempt to go, and he, poor fellow, could not.'

'I am afraid you have done mischief by going.'

'Mischief was already done when we got there!' exclaimed the enraged lady; 'and if Claypole does not set to work to expose their conduct when we tell him of their behaviour to us, I shall be very much surprised. They are the most ungenial people in the world. I mean the elder ones—we did not expect even civility from the others. They knew we had had a long ride, and our horse must require rest; but instead of ordering the man to take him to the stable, and inviting us to stop to luncheon, when we could, in a friendly way, talk over the business that had taken us there, we were received so rudely, that we could not stop in the house; and the poor horse was obliged to bring us a long way towards home before we could even get a drop of water for him.'

'Then I should think you are sorry you went.'

'Sorry! no, we cannot be sorry. It is better to know the truth, however unpleasant it may be, than to go on in a fool's paradise, hoping people are not so wicked as they are. But it is of no use talking to you. You have not the spirit of a worm to turn again when you are trodden upon. We will get some luncheon, and then find Claypole. He must not suffer

things to go as they are going on for one moment longer, or it will be said he connives at their wickedness, or that he is afraid of them.'

'You do not ask me for my opinion,' said the vicar; 'but I will once more, unasked, give it you. I would advise you, then, not to trouble yourselves about your brother's business, but rather to leave it as it is to him. He can choose his own time to set himself right with his wife and her friends. I have better hope of him now. He has promised me this morning he will not leave us again, but that he will prepare himself for holy orders, and act as my curate.'

'That will be very nice,' said Dorothy; 'but I don't see how he can stop here without having first exposed his faithless wife to the scorn and contempt of the world.'

'His first step must be to justify himself,' said Miss Lyson, 'and we shall strongly advise him to do it.'

'Very well,' murmured the vicar; 'you will do as you please, but, remember, you will act without my sanction.'

'I am sorry to say you are becoming too timid for that to have much weight with us.' And with that they left the room.

Fortified with their luncheon, the sisters

sallied out in search of their brother. They judged where they would be likely to find him, as they had been told he was seen going towards the river, with his fishing-rod and basket.

For some time past he had reason to fear that his affairs were not progressing in the most satisfactory manner. Since he had parted with his ten pounds to Circum, he felt that his confederate was acting in a more independent manner than before. He had received a short note from him to say he must leave Woodfield for a few days and go back to London. He gave no reason for going, but said he would write from London if anything particular occurred while he was there.

The idea of the mere possibility of his being made a tool of by Circum was a sore blow to the pride of Lyson, and which he would immediately have dealt with had an opportunity served.

'What could induce the fellow to go away?' he would mutter to himself, 'and leave me in this dead-and-alive place. If he does play me false after all his professions to make common cause with me against my enemy, it shall go hard with him if he ever comes within my reach again.'

He was now in a position totally foreign to his inclination. He had ere now found himself companionless in the midst of a crowd, but here he felt he was so without the vagaries of a crowd to amuse him. For his father's serious conversation he had no taste, while his sisters, with their pity, advice, and caution, annoyed and worried him. In an old lumber room he found his store of fishing tackle, which he had put carefully away many a long year since. This, with a little repairing and cautious use, he made do him good service on the bank of the river. A very mild winter had just passed away, and although it was early spring, the air was soft and genial; so that, with an extra coat and a little freedom of movement from place to place, Lyson had managed to get through the time without much loud complaining.

The sisters supposing his inaction respecting his wife arose from his excess of good-nature and unwillingness to act offensively, had become too impatient for further trifling, and were now on their way to the river to compel him to act in a matter which they judged so nearly concerned his happiness and good name. But, like many other ill-judging people, who from seeing things from an unfavourable

point of view only get a partial sight of the object, conclude they see it in all its bearings, and rush headlong into strife and turmoil while under the impression they are striving to put everything in order. In such an unsatisfactory position had the sisters unconsciously placed themselves. They did not even know of the existence of such a person as Circum, much less how his actions were influencing those of their brother, and hence their mistake in attempting to force him to act according to their will, when he was not at liberty to follow even that of his own.

They found the object of their search in his favourite spot on the river bank. It was not a late choice that took him there, but an old one of his school-days. Though great changes had taken place throughout the country, that little sheltered corner in a bend of the river remained the same. It is possible that the stream after heavy storms, when it swept by with great force, had carried with it some of the pebbly bottom, but if so, it was a work hidden from sight. It was known to be of considerable depth, and whether its bottom had been raised or carried away a foot or two could not be judged of from the surface of the water.

'Oh, Claypole!' said Miss Lyson; 'in your old place and at your old work again.'

'Yes,' said Lyson; 'but I might as well have been idle at home, for any profit my work has brought me here. I cannot understand where all the fish are gone to.'

'Have you nearly finished for the day?'

'With an empty basket to carry home! No; I must exercise my patience for an hour or two longer.'

'We came to have a little quiet talk with you.'

'Well, it is quiet enough here.'

'But it would be much better if you would take a nice walk with us.'

'I can listen to you here and attend to my work at the same time.'

'But we want your undivided attention.'

'You may have my ears, but I must have my eyes and my hands for my work.'

'We want you to be very serious.'

'Then you have caught me at the right time, as I am always serious when the fish will not bite.'

'We have been to Woodfield to-day.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes,' joined in Dorothy; 'and we have a great deal to tell you about the reception we met with there.'

'Were you invited?'

'No, we were not invited; but—'

'I don't want to hear any more about it.'

'Oh, brother!' cried both in chorus.

'Oh, sister!' mockingly said Lyson. 'Did I not tell you the other day that I knew perfectly well what I was doing, and that anything you could say or do, besides bringing to me all the gossip of the village, I would not thank you for unless you had previously consulted me?'

'But we have told you so much, and you have done so little.'

'You do not know what I have done, and I cannot tell you at present. If you could only have as much patience with me as I am obliged to have with the fish I should be glad.'

'We have spent our time and money for you,' said Dorothy.

'In your own way, but that is not the way to oblige me. I repeat what I have said before: I want facts, and if you can collect some, I will thank you for every one separately. Ah, there is a bite at last!'

The sisters turned away with their handkerchiefs to their eyes. After all they had done, and were prepared to do, was this to be their reward from father and brother alike?

Was there nothing they could do to open their eyes to the necessity of action?

The bite having led to nothing but the re-adjustment of the bait, Lyson, thinking he had quieted his companions, said carelessly,—

'I am sorry if I have offended you, but in this matter you must allow me to act for myself.'

As the words, I am sorry, fell upon the ears of the sisters, their eyes brightened, and the sense of ingratitude from which, a moment before, they felt they were suffering, melted away like the morning mist before the rising sun.

'We do not wish to interfere with your private affairs,' said Miss Lyson; 'we only wish to serve you, and—'

'Have you at last!' cried Lyson, as he landed a two-pound fish on the bank by his side.

We must now turn to Circum. Disagreeable and disreputable as he is, we must follow him to London, and learn, if we can, the object he had in view in undertaking the journey. In his interview with Lea he had, in his confidence in the success of his scheme, been very bold in asserting the legitimacy of the young man at Bath. When he left Lea, his inten-

tion was at once to set out for Bath; but before he reached his lodgings, a few questions arose in his mind as to whether he was not travelling a little too fast. In short, whether he had sufficient come-at-able evidence to establish his relationship to the orphans. Having warned Nancy of his intended absence, he hurried to the station and took a ticket, not for Bath but for London.

'Yes,' he thought, 'I must communicate with a friend or two across the water, who will manufacture for me the proof I want of my relationship to the dead woman. It will delay the attack for a few days, and perhaps make Lyson a trifle impatient; but there is no help for it; he cannot do without me, and must perforce wait my time.'

'I must go upon sure lines, and be able to show the great man that my claim, on the part of the boy, is not an imaginary one, and that if he will not buy us off, he must expect to fight a losing game. I may pass a few days at Islington very pleasantly; thanks to my good fortune in meeting with the friend who took me there. I must have the girl convinced of the fact that there can be no doubt of my relationship to her. When one is engaged in an enterprise that needs a lie or

two for its support, an extra one cannot make much difference.

'I can have no difficulty with her when she is made to understand how far her own fortune and that of her brother's depends on her listening to me and slipping into the groove I will have prepared for her to move in. I hope I shall be able to manage with my friends in France without crossing the Channel; but if I cannot, I must be at the trouble and expense of going over.'

Arrived at Islington, he did not miss the welcome he expected. He called to see Mrs Wilkins, to let her and her charge know of his return to London for a few days. On reaching his lodgings, his first care was to sit down and write to two friends in France, to recall to their recollection events that had never happened, that they might be able to make affidavits and swear to the facts stated in them as many times as should be found necessary.

'Let them answer me like sensible men,' he muttered, as he folded up his letters, 'and the game is mine.'

As he hinted to Mrs Wilkins that he had been round by Woodfield during his absence, the old lady, who knew the place well and

many of the villagers, was very anxious that he should take tea with her, that she might have a little gossip with him about what he had seen and heard there. Nor was Miss Montag a whit less ready to receive him, though she kept her reason for being so as a well-guarded secret. The old lady was for general information; but her charge was for the particular.

At the tea-table Circum made himself specially agreeable, and greatly amused his hostess with an account of the doings of some of her old friends at Woodfield. Nancy's courtship and marriage did him good service, as also did his interview with the schoolmaster and his pupil, which brought the past vividly before the eyes of Miss Montag. Incidentally he mentioned that he had heard that a Mr and Mrs Cresswell, with a married daughter, were on a visit at the Hall.

'Ah,' said Mrs Wilkins, 'that marriage of Miss Cresswell was a sad mistake. The young people were never suited to each other, and I don't believe the marriage would have ever taken place if it had not been for the gentleman's sisters.'

'I heard his name there,' said Circum; 'I think it was Lyson.'

'Yes, and a fine-looking man he was; but I heard he made a bad husband, and his wife went home to her father.'

'They seem to live on very friendly terms with Sir Edward Harewood.'

'Yes, and well they may. Mr Cresswell is Sir Edward's uncle on the mother's side.

'Oh, then,' said Circum, 'Sir Edward and the daughter are first cousins; so there is nothing strange in their attachment for each other.'

'Strange!' said Mrs Wilkins. 'No, I should think not. And where is the husband now?'

'Oh, I don't know! Somewhere abroad, I believe.'

'I heard some rather wild stories about the cousins.'

'I don't believe a word you heard against them; but perhaps it would be as well if they were not so much together.'

'I should think it would,' said Circum; 'but that, of course, is their business. I suppose you know all about the poor fellow that was shot,' he added, to Miss Montag.

'I heard of it,' she replied evasively.

'You must have been there at the time, if the account I heard of the accident was true.'

'I was there,' she replied; 'but it was all so sad, that I don't like to think about it.'

'I had a long talk with one of the under keepers. I think his name was Dixon, the man who was at one time supposed to have shot the other.'

'Oh yes,' said Miss Montag; 'but that was all a mistake.'

She was becoming very uneasy under the searching eyes of Circum, and would have changed the subject had she been able, when he followed up his attack by saying, from what he had heard, it did not appear like an accident.

'Why, what else could it be?' asked Mrs Wilkins.

'Men sometimes purposely shoot themselves,' replied Circum, looking sharply at Miss Montag, who shrank back from his gaze. He was satisfied he had now found the cause of her occasional absent manner, and the little inclination she had shown to talk of her own affairs. There had been a love affair between her and the under keeper, who had shot himself in a fit of despair.

Having arrived at that conclusion, he was far too practised a hand to attempt to push his discovery any further at present. It might

prove to be an incident perfectly useless to him, or he might be able, in some unforeseen way, to turn it to good account in the carrying out of his scheme, in which he was likely to find her very useful. That he must have her assistance he saw plainly enough, and the more he knew of the inward working of her mind, so much the easier would he find his task in dealing with her and in bringing her will in subjection to his.

The evening passed very pleasantly away, and, as he thought, profitably to himself. With Miss Montag the case was very different. The fond name her ears had been so eager to greet, fell upon them incidentally but two or three times during the evening. Circum's attention when at Woodfield did not appear to have been called in any special manner to Jesse. This might have arisen from his not at that time being at home, as also that he was only the second son, and therefore not of much consequence.

Before laying his head on his pillow that night, he had resolved that, if he did not hear from his friends on the other side of the water in the course of two days, he would send them a telegram to ask them to meet him at Boulogne on the following day. And now

having settled on that, he thought I will devote the intervening space to pleasure or business as opportunity may serve.

Meantime, Miss Montag had retired to her own room nursing her disappointment in silence. As day had followed day, though Mrs Wilkins was very kind to her, she could not disguise from herself that she was little better than a prisoner in the house. She had hesitated to open her heart fully to her well-tried friend Mrs Smith, who had ever treated her like a daughter or sister; but now, instead of opening it ever so slightly, it was the more firmly closed to all around her, and it was very pleasant for her to feel, amidst her distracting thoughts, that her great secret was safe in her own bosom. For whatever Sir Edward might show a disposition to do, she would wait patiently and complain to no one but to him and Jesse.

But shortly the mental struggle that was going on in the mind of the poor girl began to tell upon her health, and to make her good-natured keeper grow concerned about her. She could not imagine why she should grow pale and thin. Was not her living of the right kind, if it was not, it should be changed directly.

'It is all very good,' was the only reply she could get.

'I think we are in the house too much,' said Mrs Wilkins, 'so for the future we will go out for an hour or two every day. I can't abear to see you growing so unfavourable like; you don't eat enough. I think you must be in love, and if you don't eat more, I shall get the doctor to you.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE two days having passed, and no letter arriving from over the water for Circum, he carried out his plan by sending off his telegram, and in the course of the afternoon received back the following:—'Just returned from up country journey. Come over to us; we want to see you here.'

'All a trick, no doubt,' he murmured, 'but no matter. I must go or they will rate their services so highly that, however successful we may be, I shall have little left for myself.' His answer therefore was immediately despatched. 'You may expect to see me to-morrow by the first packet.' Then having informed his landlady of his intended absence, and bidden Mrs Wilkins and Miss Montag good-bye, he went by the night train to Folkestone.

During the last two days, besides making a

lucky stroke or two at billiards and card-tables, he had not been idle in the business of preparing Miss Montag for the part he meant her to play in the coming struggle.

He had gone so far as to speak privately to her of her and her brother's prospects in the future; of what position in life they looked forward to occupy, and how much or how little they had to expect from the generosity of Sir Edward Harewood. He did not do this in direct terms as is here set forth, but, serpent-like, he coiled his questions around her, and obtained her answers almost without her knowledge. He learnt that she knew nothing of Sir Edward's purpose concerning her future; but as he had hitherto been very kind to her, she had no reason to think that he would be ever different.

He had satisfied himself that she had been sent to London on account of the misadventure of the under keeper for a little change. Had he dreamed of her love for Jesse, he would soon have entered on another mode of proceeding, but as he did not, he went on under his false impression, resolved for the present not to tell her of the discovery he had made of her parentage. 'She is a sensible girl,' he thought; 'but the heads of sensible girls are apt to grow giddy

when the sun shines too strongly upon them.' To be called upon suddenly to rise up from a dependent position to one of independence, is enough to make the brain of any one tremble in the balance. So we will go carefully forward without risking anything of the kind.' Just as he was leaving the house before setting out for Folkestone, he whispered to her,—'When I return, you may hear of something that will greatly surprise you, and probably change the whole course of your future life.'

Miss Montag heard him imperfectly and could not understand him, and ere she could, had she been inclined, beg him to repeat what he had said, he was gone, and his words must remain without meaning to her until his return, which did not take place before Jesse had reappeared again on the scene at Woodfield.

Sir Edward lost no time in fulfilling the promise he made to Jesse of taking Mr Cresswell into his confidence respecting the position in which the startling narrative had placed him. Great was the surprise of that gentleman as he listened to the unexpected and strange report brought from Germany, and serious and earnest were the observations he made upon it when it was finished.

'Then you advise me,' said Sir Edward, after they had been in consultation for some time, 'to take no action in the matter further than what I may accomplish by private inquiry to inform myself of the truth of the narrative you have just heard?'

'Quite so,' replied Mr Cresswell. 'I would not even have you name it to my wife or daughter while there is the slightest uncertainty respecting any portion of it. It is very clear, from what you tell me of Jesse, that he is fully impressed with the reality of his statement in everything excepting the kind of marriage that took place—in short, whether it was or was not legal. I am inclined to think it was a sham affair; but if the poor girl was deceived, it would be wrong to speak of her as an abandoned woman, whose children could have no possible claim upon you. Do you agree with me in that?'

'Most certainly,' replied Sir Edward.

'Then I think your course is very clear. With Jesse's statement in your hand, it will not be difficult privately to trace its action from point to point, until in the end you can safely satisfy yourself that it is in part or wholly true, or cast it aside as a fiction which circumstances have imposed upon him.'

'But before we settle on the best means of prosecuting our inquiry, I must come to terms with Jesse,' said Sir Edward, 'respecting his desire to communicate with Miss Montag. He has, I believe, faithfully kept his promise of not attempting to see or write to her without my permission, and I do not think I should be doing right by putting his obedience to a more severe trial; but how to manage with him without doing so I am far from seeing.'

'The entanglement of the young people is, as you say, most unfortunate,' observed Mr Cresswell, 'but it is evident that your arrangement for their final separation has entirely failed, at least as far as Jesse is concerned, and, to my mind, his behaviour entitles him to your kindest consideration.'

'Would you advise me to let her visit to London end in her being recalled to her old place in Smith's house?'

'I could hardly advise that,' replied Mr Cresswell. 'If she were so to return, it would doubtless appear to them that you tacitly agreed to their meeting, and that would amount to your approval of any connection they might desire to form with each other, and I presume you are not quite prepared for that.'

'No, most decidedly not,' replied Sir Edward.

'The whole question is too serious to be thus dealt with. Jesse has, doubtless, been true to any pledge he has given her, and we can have no reason to think she has acted otherwise towards him; but they are both very young, and if our inquiry should lead us to the conviction that I have been occupying a position which of right belonged to another, and that other her own brother, one can hardly imagine how she will be disposed to act when the fact comes to her knowledge. Can we be sure that her little head will not be turned with her change of circumstances and the inevitable flattery to which she will from interested persons be exposed?'

'It is a difficult thing to be prepared at all points for future contingencies,' said Mr Cresswell; 'but could you not make a sort of compromise with Jesse, and leave the question nearly in its present state for a while?'

'I do not see on what ground,' said Sir Edward despondingly.

'Suppose, while holding him to his promise of not seeing Miss Montag, you were to withdraw your request respecting the letter-writing?'

'I am afraid that would render their separation impossible.'

'I do not agree with you,' rejoined Mr Cress-

well. Jesse is not devoid of judgment, and I believe he is not disposed to be unreasonable.'

'I am afraid you are a little too partial to Jesse.'

'My opinion of him is based on his past conduct. He appears to me to have acted openly and honestly in following out his own plan, while he has kept the promise he made to you.'

'He is very fortunate in having you as an advocate, and I cannot argue against the course you suggest.'

'You will see Jesse immediately?' said Mr Cresswell.

'Yes,' was the reply.

Very shortly afterwards Jesse was seated in the chair lately occupied by Mr Cresswell, listening attentively to his father as he commented again on the strange affair, the knowledge of which he had brought home to him.

Taking advantage of a slight pause, Jesse said,—

'Father, I am afraid there is still some doubt in your mind of the correctness of my statement.'

'I have no doubt your statement is in direct agreement with your judgment, Jesse.'

'I want you to understand,' replied Jesse, 'that I have brought to you not the result of any judgment of mine, but a simple account of the

facts as they came before me. Everything, with the one exception, is as plain to me as that I am now seated before you.'

'And that is the most important point.'

'Yes, in one sense I see it is.'

'In every sense,' replied Sir Edward.

'No, father,' said Jesse, 'not in every sense; nor from my view of the case is it the most important. I understand you to speak of it as a question of property, but with me it is a question of the heart. My love for Miss Montag brought the question first seriously before me, and I am persuaded it will so keep it before me irrespective of all worldly views.'

'You do not know what the world is, Jesse,' said his father, with a faint smile.

'Nor do I care to know, father, if further knowledge of it would make me ungenerous or selfish. I must speak plainly to you. If I did not, I should play the hypocrite before you, and feel unworthy of your confidence.'

'I ask you for no other sacrifice but that of a little patience,' said Sir Edward.

'Patience for what, may I ask?' cried Jesse. 'What can patience do for me? Can it alter the facts which have cost me so much time and labour in their collection? Suppose the poor woman who came to such a miserable end was really

never married,—that she lived and died a victim to him who is gone to his account,—should the knowledge of that have any effect on my love for one who is as innocent as he was guilty? I cannot think that you will argue that it should. Is she impure because he was? Did he bestow upon her the kind and gentle spirit that pervades her every thought? No, you cannot say he did. Have I not heard you assert that the spirit of man comes pure and direct from the hands of his Maker.'

'It did originally, doubtless,' replied Sir Edward; 'but I think I need not remind you that Adam, through disobedience in paradise, fell from his high estate; but I do not think we are called upon to discuss that question at present. I have simply to ask you, as my own dear boy, to have patience and trust to my sense of justice to do right.'

'Were my own feelings alone concerned in the matter,' replied Jesse, 'I would not say another word in the way of contention with you, but I cannot forget that such is not the case. It is now weeks since, in obedience with your wish, I gave you a promise which I have since religiously kept. I little thought when I made that promise that my patience would have to undergo the trial it has had. If at the time

I thought at all seriously upon the subject, I did not dream of binding myself to silence for more than a few days. With scarcely a word I suffered you to part me from one who was as dear to me as my own life.

'I yielded to your wish, and left you to take her I knew not whither. I return to you after many days of absence, and all that you will let me know of her is that she is well. Can you think that will content me? I want to know if she has not been very lonely and sad, and at times been tempted to think I had forgotten her. This may appear to you as idle talk. You who have always lived so calm and quiet a life, and never felt the intolerable sensation of separation from a beloved object, cannot, I am persuaded, understand the torture you are inflicting on me, and more so on one whose only crime that she can have committed against you is, that she has seen something in your son to love!'

Carried away by the earnestness of his feelings, Jesse had spoken freely and rapidly, as if he would not give his father an opportunity of stopping him; but his caution in that respect was unnecessary. Before he had finished speaking he saw his father lean forward over his writing-desk, and, placing his hands before his

eyes, become convulsed with his unspoken passion. He suddenly stopped, and rising, rushed to his side, with the exclamation of,—

'Are you not well, father?'

For a few seconds a painful silence pervaded the room, then Sir Edward, making a strong effort to overcome his emotion, lifted his eyes to his son, and said,—

'I was not very well, but I am better now.'

Jesse could not understand his father's appearance. To him his eyes appeared suffused with tears, and his whole frame trembling from some unseen cause.

'You must please excuse me, father,' he said at length; 'I did not mean to offend you.'

'And you have not done so,' was the reply in little more than a whisper.

'Then you are ill. Shall I call for assistance?'

'No,' replied his father, as he rose from his chair and staggered towards the window.

Before Jesse could find words to give expression to the fear that had seized upon him, Sir Edward, struggling with himself, had so far subdued his emotion that he was able to turn and say,—

'It is nothing—it is nothing! only a little faintness that I sometimes suffer from.'

'I never saw you so affected before.'

'No,' replied his father; 'my attacks do not often come upon me when any one is present, and you will, if you please, take no notice of it to your brother or sisters. I am better now—quite well, you see,' he added with a smile. 'And now, to finish our long and somewhat painful conversation, I have a proposal to make to you which, I trust, you will accept. I want you to renew your promise that you will not attempt to see Miss Montag, if I consent to your communication being carried on by letter only.'

'I need make no promise,' said Jesse, 'if I rightly understand your desire, which I hope I may take it as simply referring to the present time.'

'Yes,' said his father; 'or until we can come to some further arrangement. I will give you the needful address, and you can write by the next post; but I shall be glad to know that you have not entered into any long explanation of the subject that is engaging our attention.'

'Do you wish me not to mention it?'

'I would rather you did not, and that was one reason why I did not readily consent to the commencement of your correspondence. But

that is now settled, and, I may tell you, in accordance with Mr Cresswell's advice.'

'For which I will not fail to thank him,' said Jesse.

'You will soon have an opportunity of doing so, as I have proposed to him that he and you should see Lea before your return becomes the topic of conversation, and closely question him not only upon his own report, but upon the facts you have discovered, in which he appears so deeply concerned.'

'Will you not be present also?'

'No; we have considered the point, and concluded that it is best I should not. Mr Cresswell, you know, is a magistrate as well as myself, and, if any public notice is to be taken of your interview, it would be better under his hand than mine. When the matter gets abroad, as doubtless it soon will, it might be supposed, if I took an active part in the inquiry, that I had been seeking to bias the evidence in my own favour.'

'Who would dare think so?'

'No one can, if we do not give them the opportunity,' replied Sir Edward.

Mr Cresswell having entered and taken his seat near Jesse, the bell was rung for Lea, who in a few minutes, assisted by a stout walking-

stick, came hobbling into the room. His attack of gout had passed away, but it had left him apparently more fit for his bedroom than stumbling about the house to look after the under-servants, as he had persisted in doing for the last few days.

As soon as he was fairly in the room, Sir Edward rose from his chair and silently passed out.

'You are looking but poorly to-day,' observed Mr Cresswell.

'I am not as strong as I was,' said Lea; 'but while I am able to get about, I must not be idle.'

'We want to have a little conversation with you,' said Mr Cresswell, 'respecting an occurrence that took place when you were in Germany some years since.'

The sunken, pallid cheeks of the old man flushed for a moment as the name of Germany fell upon his ears, and then returned to their former hue. He brought his stick, on which his right hand had been leaning, to the front, and placing his left hand on the right, bent forward upon it, as the gentlemen thought, to save himself from falling on the floor, but in reality to stand unmoved defiantly before them.

'Sit down,' said Mr Cresswell.

'Thank you, sir,' said Lea, 'but I am able to stand.'

Jesse, fearing the old man would break down before he could answer the questions he proposed to put to him, said rather abruptly,—

'We want you to explain the statement you made to my father after your return from your last visit to Germany.'

'Yes,' said Lea, 'I thought you did.'

'Then why did you not volunteer to explain?'

'I had nothing to explain,' said Lea. 'I brought back the answers to my inquiries, and what more could I do?'

'I will show you,' said Jesse. 'Do you know I have just returned from your route?'

'Yes, and I think I heard you say you could not find any trace of a mark I left behind me.'

'I did not tell you so.'

'You talked loud enough for me to hear you.'

'And now,' retorted Jesse, 'I repeat the same to your face.'

'And what did you expect after all these years? Did you think I travelled about in a coach-and-six like a prince, with a crowd of people at my heels?'

'No,' said Jesse; 'but I did expect to find

some slight proof that your statement was correct.'

'Did you find anything to show it was false?'

'The failure of proof points in that direction; and besides, the route you say you took was not the right one.'

'How could I tell which was the right one?'

'You knew before you started.'

'Did I? How did I know that, may I ask?'

'Let it suffice. I know you did.'

'You are young, Mr Jesse—very young—to talk to a man of my age in such a manner. I appeal to Mr Cresswell, who is a magistrate, to know if you have a charge of wrong-doing to bring against me—whether you are justified in commencing the attack upon me as you have done.'

'I presume,' observed Mr Cresswell, 'that Mr Jesse wished to obtain privately an admission of something that took place years since to avoid a public scandal.'

'If he can prove I acted dishonestly let him do so, and I will then speak in my own defence; but if he cannot do so, since he has been pleased to make himself so busy about me, I will reply no further to him than justice requires me to do.'

'Do you mean to say,' asked Mr Cresswell, 'that you will not answer any more questions Mr Jesse may wish to put to you?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Then I think,' said Mr Cresswell, 'I would advise Mr Jesse to refer the matter to Sir Edward.'

'To whom he pleases,' replied Lea, 'so that he does not keep me standing here all the day.'

'You surprise me,' said Jesse.

'Ah, Mr Jesse,' retorted the old man, 'you will have many things to surprise you before you reach my years.'

'What course Sir Edward will take with you,' said Mr Cresswell, 'I cannot tell; but I shall feel it my duty to let him know how much I am dissatisfied with your behaviour. I think you may leave us now.'

Without a word more Lea turned round and hobbled out of the room, leaving the two gentlemen looking at each other in mute astonishment. The old steward did not return to his own room to mourn over the treatment he had met with from one he looked upon as a child, but in search of Sir Edward, whom he found alone in the dining-room. The spirit of good or evil, whichever it might be, was fully aroused in him, and his master was surprised

to hear him say, as he entered the room, 'I have come to give you notice that I wish to leave your service, Sir Edward.'

'Why is that?' asked his master. 'What has occurred to make you wish to leave me?'

'I am suspected of having done something wrong while in your service. What it is I don't know. Mr Jesse perhaps can tell you. He has insulted me, and I will not sleep in the house another night.'

'You are out of temper,' said Sir Edward, 'and will think better of it presently. Where is Mr Jesse?'

'I left him in the library.'

'I will go to him,' said Sir Edward. He saw that any attempt to argue with the angry old man would be useless.

By the time the gentlemen in the library had finished their deliberation on the untoward event, as Sir Edward was disposed to look upon it, the old steward had created quite a revolution in his room. The late interview or its result had not come upon him unawares. Since Circum's visit his mind had been seriously turned to the incident to which that gentleman had so unceremoniously alluded, and he had convinced himself that Woodcome Hall would no longer afford him the shelter it had hitherto

done. Daily from the period of his visit he had hourly expected his return.

Two courses only were open to him. Either he must confess to Sir Edward the rascality of which he had been guilty, and crave his forgiveness and restoration to favour, or set him and all around him openly at defiance. If he chose the first he would have Circum as his enemy, and as many stains upon his character as he could fix upon it, which were not a few. The last course was the most simple, and if his enemies failed to substantiate any charge they might make against him, he would henceforth be his own master, and hold up his head as high as ever. Yes, he would decide on that.

Whatever Jesse might have discovered, he was satisfied that he had made out nothing that would criminate him, or he would have proceeded in a different manner. If he really knew what he had done when he was with the late Sir Henry he would have at once been charged with dishonesty and dismissed the service. He had not been in attendance in the dining-room and elsewhere like a deaf dog if he had been a dumb one. He knew nearly as well as Jesse himself what had passed, and also if he held his tongue and could manage to keep Circum quiet, the link in the chain that

connected him with the missing woman would be wanting.

Resolved what he would do, he took time by the forelock and silently prepared for his removal from the Hall, and the powerful influence he had for so long exercised there. With this view he had fixed upon Mrs Brown's cottage, where he would for a time take up his abode. Years since, after the death of his wife, he had been very attentive to Mrs Brown, and had gone so far as to hint something of marriage, but a misunderstanding crept in between them, and although he continued occasionally to call at the cottage, he appeared to do so more for the purpose of wrangling with her than for any more worthy purpose.

Of late, feeling the difficulty he had sometimes of getting about, and how useful a good nurse would be to him in his declining years, he had had serious thoughts of bringing his misunderstanding with Mrs Brown to a close, and settling down at the cottage with her. He could hire a bedroom at first, and if he found his old love agreeable, he might offer her marriage, and remove with her to a better house.

The only drawback he had come upon in his reasoning on the matter was the little rascal of a boy she had grown so fond of. If he could

have got rid of him, he had been for some weeks ready for the change. But in that, as he could not accomplish his purpose, he had striven to put his dislike to the boy aside, and endeavoured to make himself very agreeable at the cottage, so that when his open rupture took place with Jesse, he had become a welcome visitor there.

In less than three hours after the explosion in the library, despite all Sir Edward could do or say to cool what he looked upon as a hasty fit of anger, his property was in a cart on its way to the green lane. 'I might have stopped my mouth and saved my money,' he murmured, as he hobbled away from the Hall, 'but I can live close for a time, and make up for the loss.'

On reaching the cottage, he found everything in order ready for his reception. Mrs Brown, like a sensible woman of slender means, had listened to the alteration in his tone with a complaisant ear. He had told her that he felt he was growing old, and unequal to his duties at the Hall, and that he would not go on there slaving for ever. That he required rest, and, if she would let him have a room at her cottage, he would seek it there.

Who will blame Mrs Brown for being open to flattery, particularly when it came to her from an old lover and a man who was supposed,

by one means and another, to have amassed property to the extent of some thousands of pounds. It would, of course, occasion her extra work, but what of that? She would have the means of paying her woman the more frequently.

Her little lively boy was her only cause for anxiety. How he and Mr Lea would agree together she could not quite see. She had done her best to make things pleasant between them, and she trusted she had no reason to think that she had laboured in vain, but that all would go on well,—and she was not disappointed.

Lea had been an actor from his youth, and had bent himself to circumstances as they seemed to favour his interest, so, though he would at times show a great amount of independence, he was ever ready to lower his back to the burden from which he could not escape without loss to himself. Hence, when he found he could not induce Mrs Brown to part with her boy, he resorted to a practice with him which he had formerly found so effectual with his grandson Philip. He changed his whole manner to the boy, and, instead of his old frown and growl, met him with a smile and a kind word, and very often with a more sub-

stantial proof that he desired to be looked upon by him as a friend.

Stephen at first eyed his old enemy with suspicion, and kept at a respectful distance from him, particularly when he had his stick in his hand. But this feeling gradually wore off, so that by the time Lea was ready to take possession of his room, the boy had grown almost as observant of him as he was of his old well-tried friend Mrs Brown.

'Why, Stephen,' Lea would say to him, 'you are becoming really a good, useful boy, and I must speak to Mr Montag about getting you a good place, so that you may leave school, and not be bothered any more with learning lessons, and then we shall very soon make a man of you.'

About the trouble of learning lessons Stephen cared but little. They, when he chose to apply his mind to them, had never interfered with his sleep, but to grow into a man was quite another thing, and aroused him to more active exertion to please. While Lea could continue to hold up a good place and the coming manhood to Stephen, he need not fear any further annoyance from him,—he would soon see that he was converting his late tormentor into an obedient and active slave.

Scarcely had Lea taken possession of his room, when another fit of the gout came to relieve him from being troubled with inquisitive people. To all, excepting Sir Edward's solicitor, he refused admittance, and he would have done so to him if he had not thought he could blind him to the real state of his mind, and thus stave off all further questioning from Jesse or any one else from the Hall.

Circum, on hearing from Nancy, as part of the gossip of the village, of Lea's removal to the cottage, called to see him in a great hurry on his way to Downend. He had finished his business in France, and left London for the final attack. His first object was to see Lyson, but, that he might make himself acquainted with any change that had taken place at the Hall during his absence, he thought it prudent to make a detour to Woodfield by the way. But Lea had prepared for his coming by directing Mrs Brown that, if a gentleman by the name of Circum should call, she was to tell him that he was too ill to be seen. That he had been trying the ointment he left with him, and that he hoped to be able to see him very soon.

'Surely he could see me for five minutes now.'

'No,' replied Mrs Brown, 'he is not able to see any one to-day.'

'Tell him,' said Circum, 'that I will call again to-morrow, or the next day. Say I am now on my way from London to Downend, and that when I return I shall have something very pleasant to say to him.'

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH inexpressible joy Miss Montag received Jesse's letter from the hands of the postman, who, all unconscious of the importance it was to her, placed it in her hand as though it had been a mere circular from a toy shop. It was the first letter Jesse had written to her; but she knew his handwriting, and without bestowing a second glance upon it she glided away into her room, that the excitement pervading her whole frame, which she felt she could not conceal, might not be witnessed by another.

How many kisses were bestowed upon the envelope, and how they were increased in number and intensity upon the treasure it contained, we need not note. They were honest kisses, and prompted by a grateful heart. The business of the day had not left

Jesse time to write a long letter, but it was long enough to assure her of his unalterable love, and that was sufficient for her. He told her of his having been on the Continent, and that he had reason to hope that he should soon, in another letter, be able to give her a full and interesting account of his travels.

'You must not think because my letter is short I am writing unknown to my father. It is simply because I am pressed for time to catch the first post after I have obtained his consent. He is very good, and if you are disposed to answer this, though he should find your letter in the bag, I could trust him to hand it to me unsealed as it left your hand.'

Lizzie required no further invitation to write, but immediately, in the innocency of her heart, set about what, ere it was finished, proved rather a severe task. Her pen was not a very good one, and the ink decidedly thick and bad, and from some cause or other the words would not come out in the order in which she wished to place them on the paper. At one moment a tiresome hair would attach itself to the nib of her pen and join letters and words together which ought to stand apart, and then a drop of ink would maliciously leap out from her pen to spoil her paper.

At length, however, her task was completed and the envelope closed, stamped, and ready for the post. How was she to get it to the office now became the question. It was far too precious to be trusted in the hands of a stranger, and she could not ask Mrs Wilkins to put it in or let the maid run with it without exciting her curiosity and subjecting herself to much unpleasant questioning. Mrs Wilkins was very kind to her, but she would as soon have thought of calling in the dustman to read her letter as show it to her. And so it happened that, though so wishing to get it into the post the moment it was finished, she was obliged to wait until she was out for a walk with her guardian in the afternoon for an opportunity of dropping it unseen into the letter-box.

The old lady knew nothing of the arrival of the letter, or how busy certain little fingers had been in answering it; but she did not fail to observe that her companion appeared in much better spirits, and that a slight tinge of her old country colour had again resumed its place on her cheeks. This excited her curiosity, and but for an incident that turned her thoughts in another direction, her questions might have proved difficult to answer.

'Well, now!' exclaimed Mrs Wilkins as they were leaving High Street, 'if my old eyes do not deceive me, that was Mr Circum who just turned the corner. But that is not the way to his lodgings or our house. If we make haste we shall see where he is going.'

When they had reached the corner, and were in the act of turning into the next street, they came directly upon the gentleman in question.

A few words explained the reason, or the want of reason, of his going in the wrong direction.

'The fact is,' he said, 'I am just come from the train, and while thinking of something else I took the wrong turning. And where have you been, may I ask?'

'Only doing a little shopping,' replied Mrs Wilkins.

'Will you be at home this evening?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'I thought you were going to see a sick neighbour?' said Miss Montag.

'Oh yes, I forgot, but I can put that off or make my visit a very short one,' said Mrs Wilkins; a great desire had seized upon her mind to learn something more of the movements of Circum than she had yet been able. Where could he go with his little black bag and

return as prim as if he had just come out of a hairdresser's shop.'

'I am going away again to-morrow,' he said, 'and if you can have me for an hour or two this evening, I shall be very glad, for to speak the truth when I have had my tea I find the time hang heavily on my hands.'

'Perhaps you will come and take a cup of tea with us?'

'I can only say, with thanks,' replied Circum, 'that I shall be most happy to do so.'

'We shall be quite alone,' said Mrs Wilkins.

'You are a host in yourself.'

'Well, I don't know about that,' said Mrs Wilkins, with a very satisfied air, 'but I believe I know how to keep people from wearying as well as most women.'

'I will go to my lodgings and write a letter or two, and then, if you please, come on to you.'

'What a very pleasant gentleman he is,' said Mrs Wilkins to her companion as they went on homeward together. I wonder where he is going to-morrow, and where he has come from now. I wish you would help me to find out who he is.'

'I am afraid I should be a bad one to help you, as he seems to make me talk about myself

without telling me anything you would care to know about himself.'

Circum must have been a rapid writer, or his letters were but very short ones, as little time elapsed after passing with Mrs Wilkins in the street before he presented himself at her door.

'I don't know how it is,' he said, while sipping his tea and paying great attention to the buttered toast, 'but I never take a cup of tea with you without wishing that I should never be called upon to take one anywhere else; it is so excellent in quality, and made and served with so much judgment and good taste!'

This was a matter he had learnt, upon which he might be unsparing in his flattery to his hostess. It was the great pride of her life that she was acknowledged to know how to make a good cup of tea.

'You don't get such good tea abroad?' she said.

'By no means,' replied Circum; 'they know nothing about it there, and, in consequence, give you coffee morning, noon, and night!'

'Well, I shouldn't like that,' said Mrs Wilkins.

'There is one good thing about it—it makes us enjoy our English customs the more.'

'Are you English?' said Mrs Wilkins; 'I thought you were not when I first met you.'

'I am a traveller,' said Circum; 'my chief business is in Germany, though you see it sometimes brings me to England.'

'A great business, no doubt,' said Mrs Wilkins.

'Sufficient to keep me fully employed.'

'But you don't do it all yourself?'

'Oh no, I have plenty of help; but my people want a good deal of looking after.' Then, feeling that he had sufficiently satisfied her curiosity for his purpose, he turned his attention to Miss Montag. 'And how have you been spending your time—busy with your needle, I suppose?'

'Yes, with my knitting-needles,' said Miss Montag.

'Ah, they are teaching boys to knit now, I hear; I wish they had taught me when I was young.'

'Why, what in the name of goodness,' exclaimed Mrs Wilkins, 'could you do with such sleepy work?'

'Do you call it sleepy work?'

'Yes, I do,' said Mrs Wilkins. 'Why, I have known old women who would dose off and work away as if they were wide awake.'

'What do you say to that, Miss Montag?' asked Circum.

'Say?' repeated the lady, totally ignorant of what she was expected to reply to.

'Yes; can one knit and sleep?' said Circum. 'I have said it could not be done; but I think I shall change my mind and say it is possible.'

And so the conversation went on, until the bell was rung for the maid to take away the tea things, when Mrs Wilkins said,—

'I think I will just send round to know how my old friend Mrs Snow is, and put off my visit till to-morrow.'

'I should think that would be best,' said Miss Montag.

If Circum had given way to the impulse of the moment, he would have said, 'Oh dear, no! that would not be right. If you have a sick friend to see, there is no time for a visit so good as the present.' But a second thought told him that if he gave her the least chance to think he wished to be alone with Miss Montag, her curiosity would have defeated his object. He therefore contented himself by saying,—

'I suppose there is no fear of your friend's illness ending in death before the morning?'

'She often fancies she is dying,' said Mrs

Wilkins, but I have not seen much difference in her for the last two years.'

Here the maid returned with a message that Mrs Snow felt very ill indeed, and wanted to see Mrs Wilkins very much, if only for a few minutes.

'Well, I suppose I must go,' said Mrs Wilkins.

'I am sorry,' observed Circum, 'as it will send me off to my solitary room.'

'I shall not be long gone,' said Mrs Wilkins; 'and why should you go away? There are plenty of books for you to look at, and if you get tired of them you can get a lesson on knitting.'

'I am afraid I am too old to learn, and perhaps Miss Montag would not take the trouble to teach me.'

'Nonsense,' said Mrs Wilkins, 'you just make up your mind to stop till I come back;' and with that she retired, followed by Miss Montag to assist in equipping her for her short journey.

'I think,' said Miss Montag, 'I will stop here till you return.'

'Now, there is no occasion for that. You are not afraid of him, surely? If he were a smart young man it might be different.'

'No, it would be the same to me.'

'Oh yes, I dare say it would. But never mind, and do not look so serious about it. Go in and sit down as if I was there, and make the poor old gentleman as much at home as you can. We have none of us too many friends.'

On re-entering the parlour, Miss Montag took up her knitting and resumed her seat.

For a few minutes, Circum remained near the table upon which the books lay, reading a bit here and a bit there, and making an occasional observation on their contents; he then rose from his seat, saying as he did so,—

'I think I have been reading too much of late, so I will, as my good hostess said, take a lesson, if you please, in knitting.'

'You will find me but an indifferent teacher,' said Miss Montag.

'My first lesson shall be to mark how you use the needles.'

'I would rather you kept to your books,' thought Lizzie; but she continued with her work.

'It is very curious,' he observed, 'that the few simple movements you make should produce such beautifully finished work. Ah, but I see you have to count and calculate; so I suppose it is not so simple as I thought.'

'This piece requires a little extra care.'

'And do you find your work here as pleasant as it is in the country?'

'Yes, the work itself.'

'But not so the cramped-up house. No; you like the free, open country with its birds and trees and ever-murmuring streams, in preference to the close street, with its noisy boys and lumbering vehicles. Then there you have by day the bright, warm sun to cheer you, and by night the moon, planets and twinkling stars to raise your thoughts to heaven. Here, by day, generally a murky atmosphere, and by night the glimmering gaslights to draw your eyes down to the dirty streets.'

'I do not think it is quite so bad as that, though I confess I prefer the country.'

'And it would be strange if you did not,' said Circum, 'since the greater part of your life has been spent in what may fairly be called a garden.'

'Did you see much in Woodfield to admire?'

'Yes, much; and I saw your brother's boy, to whom I took a great fancy, though I heard he was rather given to mischief.'

'He is a bright little fellow,' said Miss Montag; 'but I am sometimes afraid his mischief will be laid to my brother's charge.'

'No fear of that,' rejoined Circum, 'when the good people of Woodfield know who your brother is as well as I do.'

'Know who my brother is!' said Miss Montag, stopping in her work and looking earnestly at her companion. 'Have you seen my brother?'

'No, but I have heard of him; and what would you say if I were to tell you that, in my late journey through Germany, I made some singular discoveries about his family?'

'Of my mother, do you mean?' cried the excited girl. 'If you did, and will tell me, I will call you a friend indeed!'

'Not only your mother, but your father also.'

'I am surely dreaming.'

'No, you are not dreaming. Listen to me, and I will explain.' He then ran over the narrative with which the reader is acquainted. When he had finished, he said,—'Now, have I proved myself your friend?'

'Yes, yes! But who can say that the poor woman who died in the park was the one you traced through Germany?'

'An old servant now with Sir Edward.'

'What! Mr Lea, the old steward?'

'The same.'

'And do you tell me that my mother was

the wife of the son of the late Sir Henry Harewood?'

'I have plenty of witnesses to prove that she was morally so, and two or three besides myself to prove that her marriage was legal also.'

'It must be a dream,' cried Lizzie, rubbing her eyes. 'It cannot be true.'

'Calm yourself and listen to me, for I have more to tell you yet. You thought you had not a relative in the world; you must now learn that you have many, and myself in the number.'

'It is of no use my listening! I cannot understand.'

'Be quiet,' said Circum, 'and you soon will. Try if you cannot remember something that occurred to you and your brother before you reached Woodfield. It is well known, I hear, that you both spoke some German words when you were found.'

'Yes,' she replied, 'I have been told so; and I have heard the words so often repeated, that I feel sometimes as if I did remember them.'

'And do you not remember something of Germany and your friends there?'

'Do not ask me, for I cannot answer. The

same question has been put to me so many times, and I have so tried to remember, that I do not now know the reality from that which has been suggested to me as possible.'

'A man engaged a little farmer to take you with your brother and mother in a cart to a village.'

'Did he?' said Lizzie wonderingly.

'Yes, and that man was myself, a cousin of your mother.'

'Oh, why did you not tell me something of this before. It has come upon me all so suddenly, that I can scarcely retain my senses.'

'I could not tell you until I had made the discovery myself. Until I saw you on your way from Folkestone, and was so struck with your appearance, I had no certain knowledge of the existence of you or your brother.'

'My brother,' sighed Lizzie; 'does he know all?'

'No; but to-morrow or the next day I shall go to Bath to have an interview with him. Unfortunately, he is still a minor, and cannot act for himself, so I must, at much inconvenience, act for him.'

'How act for him?'

'I must establish his title to the family estate.'

'What estate do you mean?'

'The Woodcome Hall estate, and other entails.'

'My brother the owner of Woodcome Hall? impossible! Who then is Sir Edward?'

'The son of a younger brother of Sir Henry.'

'Oh, I wish my brother were of age, I would tell him what to do.'

'What would you tell him?'

'I would beg him to go to Sir Edward, and ask him to take the management of the whole affair into his own hands.'

'Then you would beg him to do a very foolish thing; but as it is, I am the only one that can act. Unfortunately I am a stranger in England, and shall be called upon to prove my identity, I have witnesses, but they are foreigners and strangers like myself. If I have to depend entirely on them, it will be at a great sacrifice of time. You will therefore be called upon to make an affidavit.'

'What is that?'

'In the present case, a sworn statement of all that you can remember about me in Germany.'

'That will give me no trouble.'

'I am very glad to hear you say so.'

'Because I cannot remember one single thing.'

'But you must try and remember.'

'It will be useless.'

'Then,' said Circum, 'you must get your imagination to help you. If you have your brother's interest at heart, you will not let such a trifle as your bad memory stand for much.'

'But if I swore to a falsehood?"

'It would not be a falsehood,' cried Circum, interrupting her. 'I tell you it is all true, and I can prove it is.'

'Then you must do it without me.'

'You have your brother's welfare in your hands. Will you ruin him for a mere idle scruple, and condemn yourself to a false position? No, no; you will not be so weak. I will get the affidavit drawn up, and let you see it, and I know you will go through the form of signing it.'

'I cannot promise you that.'

'When your brother gets possession of his property, he will have little reason to remember he has a sister.'

'Let me see the paper, and I will sign it if I can.'

'Spoken like the girl of spirit I took you for; and now I will tell you that I am religiously interested in the success of this my scheme, to correct a wrong that was done years ago, and

which, but for my accidentally meeting you, would have gone on to the end of time without redress. I am sure the more you think of it you will agree with me, that to do an act of justice one must not be too particular about the means we use for the purpose; and then there is another thing you should take into account, though I don't like to mention it.'

'Pray, tell me what it is.'

'I have already told you that there is no question about the family to which you belong. Without doubt you are the grand-daughter of the late Sir Henry Harewood, but if we fail to prove your mother was legally married to his son, the world will treat her memory with contempt, and you will never be able to think of her without feeling that you have been grossly injured.'

'When did you say you would see my brother?'

'To-morrow or the next day; but before I go we will settle about the affidavit; but I think we had better close the business for the night. Mrs Wilkins will, I suppose, soon return, and as she is an old servant of the Harewood family, and just a little fond of talking, it will not be well that she should be taken into our council at present.'

'You knew Sir Henry had grandchildren.'

'Yes; but I had lost sight of them for a very long time.'

'From their infancy?'

'Yes.'

'After that you next saw me in the train; but how did you know me?'

'You are the picture of your mother; but you told me who you were yourself.'

'Did I?'

'Yes, in part then, but more fully since.'

'And you have taken all this trouble for us?'

'Yes, I have nothing to expect in return but gratitude, and any recompense your brother may deem fit to make me.'

'But if you cannot establish his claim?'

'Then we shall have had all our trouble and expense for nothing, and therefore you see, as I have already told you, we must not be too particular. I mean,' he added, on seeing a shade pass over Lizzie's face, 'that as our cause is just, we must use all our power to make it sure.'

'I cannot help thinking,' said Lizzie, 'it would be best if you would go and explain it all to Sir Edward, as I am sure he would not seek to take advantage of you.'

'I propose seeing him to-morrow or the next day; and—'

'Ah! here you are,' cried Mrs Wilkins,' as she entered the room, 'snug and cozy as two young people ought to be.'

They had heard her at the front door, and so were not unprepared for her appearance. Have I seemed a long time gone? It must be a good hour, I am sure, but I couldn't get away a minute sooner.'

'Keeps her bed,' said Circum.

'Oh yes, there is something wrong with her spine, the doctor says.'

'I did not finish my writing before I came, so I must ask you to let me run away now, or I shall have to sit up half the night.'

'Going away directly?' said Mrs Wilkins. 'Well, I am sorry I stopped so long.'

'I am going in the country to-morrow, but I will look round to say good-bye before I set off. Good-night; good-night.'

As soon as the door had closed upon him, the old lady turned to Lizzie, and said,—

'Has he had a letter or anything brought to him since I went out?'

'No—nothing.'

'Then I suppose he remembered something that he had neglected to do, that he

has gone off in such a hurry. Well, I am disappointed.'

Miss Montag helped her to take off her bonnet and shawl, and then said,—

'I feel very stupid and sleepy, and I think if you do not wish me to sit up with you, I will go away to my bedroom at once.'

'Are you not well?'

'More stupid than sick,' she replied as she left the room.

'Well,' thought Mrs Wilkins, 'if I did not know he was an old man, and she little more than a child, I should say there had been a love-scene between them. It seems so droll that they should both want to run away the moment I came in.'

Lizzie having closed and fastened her door, sat down by the side of her bed thoroughly bewildered by what she had heard, and what she might expect the next few days to bring to light. She then murmured, 'Without guidance I shall be lost,' and fell upon her knees. Long and earnest were the prayers her heart prompted her lips silently to utter.

Feeling comforted by what she believed to be an answer to her prayers, she rose from her humble posture, and, sitting down again, endeavoured calmly to review the events of the

day. Jesse's letter was again pressed to her lips, and blessings invoked upon his head. She now knew that, from whatever cause his long silence had arisen, he had not forgotten her, and her strong faith in his love made her feel that he never would. Thoughts of him and of his letter with her answer, would have given her happy employment, not only for that night but many nights to come, had they not been rudely broken in upon by the information, in a great part unpleasant to her, she had received from Circum.

If it was true indeed that she was the person he represented her to be, she would, for the clearing up of her doubts respecting the mystery of her birth, be very glad, but not if the knowledge of it caused a bad spirit to spring up between her brother and Sir Edward. 'It seems all too wonderful to be true!' she thought. 'Oh that I had some one here I could speak to, and who could advise me what I ought to do! But there is no one, and here, in the midst of thousands of people, I am alone! No! no! no! I am not alone,' she added after a pause. 'This dear letter assures me that I am not. I will write to Jesse and tell him the particulars of what I have learnt to-day. He will write and tell me what I ought to do, if he

cannot come to me. How do I know that Mr Circum is what he represents himself to be? He may be a good man, but what has he done or said that I should have implicit confidence in him? He wishes Mrs Wilkins should not know what he has told me. Why so? If his cause is just, what is there to be feared? I will write to Jesse and my brother directly,—but perhaps I had better think a little more of it first. Yes, I will, and patiently wait till Mr Circum calls again, so that I may be able to give every particular of what he proposes to do.'

CHAPTER IX.

MISS MONTAG'S evident desire not to sign any paper, proved not a little perplexing to Circum. He had valued what he thought he could make her say or sign at a great price. He had secured his two friends in France, so that they were ready to swear to anything he wished; but, as he had said, they were strangers, and would not carry the weight with them that her and her brother's recollections would do. But even they alone would enable him to threaten to commence an action, and carry it into court, if liberal terms were not offered for a private arrangement.

After thinking over the matter for some considerable time, he at length decided that he would not press Miss Montag any more until he had seen her brother and made him an accomplice in the plot. He had made her understand how much her brother's success

depended on her, and he felt satisfied that if the battle was once commenced, she would come to the front and assist her brother in establishing his claim.

As he now deemed it unnecessary to be over-cautious in his bearing at Woodfield, he wrote to Nancy in the most flattering terms of her good management of her house, and its great order, cleanliness, and so on,—said he would take it as a great favour if she would let him have her room again for a few days on the old terms. He wrote also to Lyson to say he would be with him, ready for work, in the course of a day or two.

The next morning he was about betimes, and called early upon Mrs Wilkins to say good-bye, —not that he expected or wished to see her, as he had learnt that she did not appear in the breakfast-room until everything was quite ready for her to sit down to the table. He wished to have a few words with Miss Montag alone. On passing a second time by the house he saw her at the window, and beckoned her to the door.

'I am glad I have had the good fortune to meet with you so readily,' he said, 'as I wished to tell you that I find, upon fuller consideration of the points we discussed last night, that I need

not ask you at present to sign your affidavit of your remembrance of me when a child in Germany. Perhaps I shall not want it at all; but should I, and suddenly send for it, you will be ready to fulfil your last night's promise.'

'Did I make a promise?'

'I think you did; but so or not, I am sure you would not by your inaction stop the course of justice, and make your brother, instead of his taking his place amongst the gentlemen of England, a wandering vagabond on the earth, followed by the contempt and scorn of every sensible man!'

'I trust I shall not do that,' murmured Lizzie.

'No, of course you will not; but you will, on the other hand, if required, play the part of a good sister, and, as far as you possibly can, help your brother to his birthright, and clear the memory of your poor, unfortunate, and much-abused mother from the stain which will otherwise remain upon it. Were I not pressed for time, I should have much more to say to you; but I have said enough, I trust, to make you fix your eyes upon your brother's prospect of good fortune, and of the mystery of your birth being cleared up in the most satisfactory manner. You did not mention the subject to Mrs Wilkins after I left you last night?'

'No, I did not.'

'And you will not do so, if you please, until you hear from me; and now I am off. Tell Mrs Wilkins I was obliged to leave by an early train, and am sorry I could not stop to see her; good-bye; you shall soon hear from me.'

'Oh dear,' thought Lizzie, as she entered the breakfast-room, 'I do hope he will never want me to sign any papers, for I do not understand them. But I will write to Jesse.'

'How tiresome it is,' said Mrs Wilkins, as she sat down to her breakfast, 'that I was not down in time to see Mr Circum. If you had only asked him to come in, I would have slipped on my dress and been down in a minute.'

'He said he could not stop.'

'Well, he is a puzzle to me. He seems to do nothing but run about with his black bag. I wonder he does not rest a little more, and let some of his people do the running about for him. Well, and how is your headache this morning?'

'Not very well,' replied Lizzie, pleased to catch at an excuse for her want of appetite, which she knew would not pass unnoticed.

'You look feverish; I hope you are not going to have a fit of illness. What! only able to eat a bit of dry toast? Come, that will never

do; you must make a good breakfast, or I shall take you down to Mr Cole, and see what he will say to you.'

'I do not want to see Mr Cole, but I want to be very quiet this morning, and then, in the afternoon, I shall be ready to go out with you.'

'Very well, I shall be busy here this morning, and a little noisy perhaps, so you had better sit up in your own room. In the afternoon, if it holds fine, we will jump into a tram car and go up to Finsbury Park; and then, if you are not better, we must call round and see the doctor.'

While Circum was so craftily employed in London in endeavouring to strengthen his plot by drawing Miss Montag into its vortex, the state of affairs was becoming very serious at Woodcome Hall. The failure of the information they had hoped to obtain from the old steward threw them into the greatest perplexity. His silence did not affect the main features of the question, but of the legality of the marriage they were as much in the dark as ever.

Unfortunately, this question was not the only one that was giving Sir Edward grave cause for anxiety. A few days since an unexpected and unlooked-for incident occurred in the main road near the village. Sir Edward, with Mr and Mrs Cresswell and Edith, had been out for

a drive round the country, and were returning to the park when, within a few hundred yards of the gate, they came upon an apparently poor, old, lame man, who seemed to have much difficulty to save himself from being run over.

'Why didn't you keep on the footpath until we had passed?' called out the coachman. 'One would think you wanted to get run over.'

The old man shouted out something about the road being as free to him as any one.

The affair was viewed by Mr and Mrs Cresswell as a mere trifle, arising from the stupidity of a foot passenger getting thoughtlessly in the way of the horses, and Sir Edward trusted it was so, likewise with Edith, though she gave a sudden start, and became very pale as the sound of the man's voice died away.

'People are very careless,' said Mrs Cresswell, 'in getting in the way of the horses.'

'They seem to think,' said her husband, 'that coachmen always have their horses in such order that they can change their course or stop them in an instant.'

'A little practice on the box,' observed Sir Edward, 'would soon teach them better.'

Edith did not speak, but when the park gate closed behind them a look of relief passed over her countenance, and led Sir Edward to fear

that the recognition of the long-absent voice had not been confined to his own ear. When they reached the Hall she was the last to leave the carriage, and while her foot was on the step her hand convulsively grasped the arm of Sir Edward, as she said in a whisper, 'Did you hear him?' He gave an affirmative look, and they passed on without further speech.

For many days afterwards Edith did not pass out into the public road, and Sir Edward was not curious to know why she had become so much attached to the drive within the park. He would not ask her in the presence of her father and mother lest he should unnecessarily excite their fears for her safety, and he dared not do it in their absence lest he should show more of the inward working of his heart than was desirable. His daily occupation kept his mind from morbidly dwelling upon the unpleasant incident, and well would it have been for Edith if such had been the case with her.

She had her mother and father to converse with and be advised by, but why should she torture them with the idea that had seized upon her own mind that her husband was hanging about the place in disguise, either to do her some personal injury or to find an opportunity of forcibly carrying her off from her friends?

She would willingly have spoken to Sir Edward, as she still retained for him the affection of a sister, without having committed herself in any way to the confession of any other sentiment, even to her own heart.

Her self-sacrifice and innocence, however, could not protect her from the effects of her fear by day, or tormenting dreams by night. Her father and mother watched with increasing anxiety her fading colour, and the dark lines that spread themselves day by day beneath her eyes. But with all their questioning they could not draw from her the secret that was causing the unhappy change in her appearance.

'I am not very well,' she would say, 'but it is nothing to alarm you.'

'Do you think the air here disagrees with you?' asked her mother.

'I do not know why it should.'

'If you are not better in a day or two, I shall insist on your seeing a medical man.'

'You want to frighten me into good health?'

'I think I must ask your father to take us away to Wales or Scotland, or some other place at a good distance from home, where we can have a complete change of air and scenery.'

'Neither you nor papa are equal to a long journey, I am afraid.'

'You might have said so were we living in the olden times when travelling was so difficult, but now a journey by rail is quite another thing.'

'I do not wish to go away,' said Edith.

Notwithstanding her wish, however, her mother did speak to her father, and earnestly urged that her project should be adopted, and this brought the question, to his great perplexity, before Sir Edward, who had from the first rightly judged of the cause of Edith's sickness.

He now found himself in a great strait, and was for some time utterly at a loss to know what course to take. Difficulties beset him on every side. Should he give his vote for the visit to Wales or Scotland, who could say what might follow. From Lyson's appearance, as he saw him on the road, and from certain reports he had heard of him, he was inclined to think the man was growing desperate, from being unnoticed, and was ready for any mad scheme of revenge that he could hit upon.

'If,' he thought, as he argued the matter with himself, 'the journey is decided on, it will soon become the talk of the county, and give Lyson an opportunity of forcing himself upon them under the pretence of seeking an explanation with his wife. His conduct since his return shows how little he is to be trusted. Had he

come back, as he protested he should do, a repentant sinner, looking back with shame upon his past career, would he not ere this have found means to convince Mr Cresswell of the fact?

'But he has shown no disposition to do anything of the kind, and I cannot imagine why he is prowling about the country in disguise, if it is not to take some unfair advantage of Mr Cresswell or his daughter. I cannot advise them to leave the shelter of my house, and risk the placing themselves in his power. If I dared to speak to Edith alone on the subject, I think I could convince her of the necessity of her remaining here rather than seeking safety elsewhere.

'Lyson's object in coming to England becomes daily a greater enigma to me. That it was simply to see his sick father, I do not believe; and if it was to get, through Mr Cresswell's repugnance to see him, a more liberal supply of money, why he has remained so long inactive at Downend I cannot understand. If he were acting with others one might imagine a hitch had occurred somewhere in their arrangements to cause the delay, but nothing that I have seen or heard points to such a conclusion. I must speak to Edith, and strive to convince her that

she will be safer here than in any other place she could go to.'

Being thus resolved, he went immediately in search of the object of his thoughts. He had seen her a little time before in the garden, and thitherward he bent his steps. He was enabled by great care and watchfulness to control his feelings, and keep his long-cherished secret safely locked in his heart, consequently the interview did not prove very exciting.

'I want to speak to you,' he said, 'of the cause of your projected journey.'

'Of its cause?' said Edith.

'Yes,' he replied; 'you must not think I am ignorant of it. To convince you that I am not, I need only remind you of an incident that occurred some days since out in the public road, when a once well-known voice greeted my ears.'

'Then it was no mere fancy of mine?' sighed Edith.

'It does not seem likely when we both received the same impression. But, fancy or not, I have sorrowfully observed that, from that time your health and spirits have both yielded to what I doubt not is a source of great anxiety to you.'

'I have tried to imagine what could have

been his object in appearing in such a place so disguised,' said Edith, 'but I have certainly failed to satisfy myself.'

'We must leave it for time to unravel. I merely alluded to it to let you see that I know why of late you have looked so sad and ill. And now I wish to speak briefly to you of the position in which you are so disagreeably placed here, and the chance there is of its being improved by the contemplated change.'

'Do you wish me to leave the Hall?'

'No; on the contrary, it is my most earnest desire that you should remain here until your father can come to some reasonable terms with the man who may assert his power to control your actions.'

'What terms can we hope to make with him?'

'If he could prove himself worthy of your love—'

'Do not talk of it!' cried Edith. 'For years I strove to think it was possible; but now I know it is not. Come what may, I do not say I cannot live with him again, but that I will not. I cannot tell you how gross his conduct was at times when I was with him; nor have I ever told my father or mother with what contempt and scorn he spoke of them when

they did not send him the cheques he required. But I must not talk of this. Nay; I must not think of it, or I shall lose my reason in an attempt to understand the strange delusion I must have been under in my youth ever to have imagined there was anything approaching to nobility in his character.'

A fond look of admiration gleamed from the eyes of Sir Edward as he listened to her words. She saw it, but she did not shrink from him. Was he not as a brother to her, and one in whom she had ever had the greatest confidence, and with whom she had never exchanged a word or look that would have been held in check by a multitude of witnesses.

'Do not distress yourself with the recollection of your past unhappiness,' said Sir Edward. 'Let us rather consider how we can deal with the present. We must not disguise from ourselves that the vow you made at the altar is still binding upon you, and your husband might, if he chose, apply for an order to compel you to return to him.' Do not be alarmed; I do not say you would be obliged to obey it on the instant, as time might be obtained to prove he had, by his conduct, deprived himself of the claim he once had upon you. But that you could not do without much trouble, anxiety, and

expense. You would have to employ counsel and detectives to trace his past career on the Continent, which I know you would not like to do.'

'But what else could I do?'

'Remain quietly where you are, that he may have no opportunity of using force to make you comply with his wishes, whatever they may be. My opinion has been, and is still the same, that it is not so much your person that he is desirous of getting into his power as your and your father's purse.'

'If that is all he wants, he may have it freely for me.'

'Can you be content to stop here till your father can come to some final arrangement with him?'

'Content!' repeated Edith; 'I shall be more than content; I shall be happy.'

'While within the park fence you will have little cause to fear annoyance from any quarter, but once without in the public road or train, my power of protecting you would cease from anything short of personal violence.'

'Your speaking so plainly to me,' said Edith, 'has already, I feel, in a great measure restored me to myself. For some days I have sought for an opportunity of meeting you alone, but in

my weak state I fancied you strove to avoid me, which, as I could assign no cause for your doing, made me but the more unhappy.'

'We must have no more such fancies,' said Sir Edward; 'you will trust to your friends that no one can be suffered to injure or annoy you.'

'I will endeavour to do so.'

'And now,' said Sir Edward, 'I will go to your father and advise him to give up his projected journey, but you must promise to be more careful of your health than I fear you have been of late.'

'Now I feel I can speak freely to you,' replied Edith; 'you need have no fear either for my health or spirits; you will see I shall soon be myself again.'

She spoke as she thought, but the task she undertook proved too much for her strength. To the great alarm of her mother, before the sun went down that day, a natural laugh ended in a hysterical fit, which left her so languid and weak that she could not get to her bedroom without assistance.

The family doctor having been sent for, he immediately pronounced Mrs Lyson to be suffering from a nervous fever, which, though not at present showing any dangerous symptoms, must for some days prove very serious to

the sufferer and her friends. And so it happened that, while Sir Edward was congratulating himself on the control he had obtained over his feelings while conversing on so delicate a subject alone with Edith, the news reached him of her sudden attack of illness and the summoning of the doctor.

CHAPTER X.

JESSE would fain have strolled out alone, though he quietly acquiesced in his father's proposal that he should walk with him and Mr Cresswell down to the keeper's house, as he wished to speak to Smith about some alteration they had been planning in one of the woods. That morning's post had brought to Jesse Lizzie's answer to his letter, and filled his heart with a sensation of pleasure which would not permit a second person to share with him. He felt that he must be alone fully to realise and enjoy it; yes, he must get into the fields and woods by himself, and talk to the birds and trees of his happiness.

The letter was so prettily written,—so full of trust and confidence in his love; not one word of complaint on account of his long silence; not one impatient expression that he should come

and see her, or that he should obtain permission for her to return to Woodfield.

'I am a little curious,' she wrote, 'to know what circumstance you allude to which promises us so much happiness, but I will not tease you to tell me. I know you will do so as soon as you can, and that will make me wait patiently for the information. You ask me if I have been happy here. How can I answer you. The person in whose charge Sir Edward left me has been very good, and I have wanted for nothing that kind treatment could supply, but I cannot say I have been happy in my exclusion from you.'

The whole tenor of the letter assured him that his love had not been misplaced. That however lowly her position in the world might be, nature had saved her from being influenced by the thoughts and desires of vulgar minds. Like silver refined in the fire, she would come forth from her trials a purified spirit, which he must cherish as an angel sent to him from heaven. Of this kind were the thoughts that passed through his mind, and these thoughts were not to be shared by another, even though that person were his father, sister, or brother.

The walk of the three gentlemen down to the keeper's house was not accompanied by

loud talking and laughter; their conversation, taking its character from the tone of their thoughts, was guarded and serious. Confidence was not in any way wanting between them, but in their hearts there were restless thoughts which they feared to clothe in words lest they should but increase their present perplexities.

Mr Cresswell had become doubtful of the effect his leaving home had had, and was having upon the struggle in which he was engaged. When he accepted Sir Edward's invitation he was under the impression that his absence from Downend would only be of a few days' duration. That his unprincipled son-in-law having seen his father and discovered that his attempt to extort money had failed would perforce return to the Continent to save his quarterly stipend.

But his lengthened stay without any application, personal or otherwise, for an interview with him or Edith, caused him to fear that the question would not be so easily disposed of. He began to doubt whether it would not have been better for him to have remained at home, and, if he had found it necessary, appeal to the law for protection for himself and family. Of this, however, and kindred thoughts he would

not suffer himself to speak, for although Sir Edward had used no strong persuasion to induce him to leave Downend during Lyson's visit to his father, he could but remember that he did so in accordance with his advice, and that therefore any allusion to it in a regretful tone must be very unpleasant to him, and more especially so now that Edith had fallen ill and would at the best be confined to the house for some days to come.

Nor was Sir Edward less deeply impressed with the seriousness of his surroundings. He was greatly distressed on hearing the doctor's opinion of Edith, but remembering the ordeal she had just passed through, he thought it possible he might have misinterpreted the symptoms that had presented themselves to him. Of that, however, he could not speak, or of the perplexing thought that followed close upon it. Was it not possible that if she showed signs of improvement the doctor might almost immediately recommend her change of air, and thus bring about the very difficulty he thought he had escaped from; or, on the other hand, should her illness continue, might not Lyson repeat the trick he had played off upon his father, and call at the Hall and demand admittance to see his dying wife.

And to his fear for Edith's future were added the wearying thoughts which Jesse's unexpected report had filled his heart. Look at it from any point of view he might, he could not avoid coming to the conclusion that the two children he had had so long under his protection were the grandchildren of his late uncle, Sir Henry Harewood. The knowledge of that fact had made him feel that he stood in a new relation towards them, however slight in the eyes of the world their claim upon him might be.

But what must he do if they were put forward as the legitimate children of the son of the man from whom he had inherited the property? Would he in honour be called upon to resign all without a struggle? 'Yes,' he thought, 'let me be convinced that they are legitimate, and I will not shrink from my duty.'

And Jesse, did he partake of the serious mood of his companions? How could it be otherwise, when every step he took reminded him of one who had been so long suffering from a silence which he had hoped would last but for a few days. While the constraint he felt he was under from giving expression to his feeling respecting the dear letter in his pocket made him appear very thoughtful.

On one subject there was no lack of common

sympathy. Of their hopes and fears about the illness of Edith they could freely speak, and again and again during their walk the exciting subject was recurred to.

'It was very kind of Charlotte,' observed Mr Cresswell, 'to offer to sit with Edith. It will be a great relief to my poor wife, who is not equal to the many duties of a sick-room, and I know she would not like to see her darling given over to the care of a stranger.'

'It seems very fortunate,' said Jesse, 'that her sickness has come upon her when she can have so much friendly attention.'

'Yes,' replied Mr Cresswell,' 'she is much better off than you were when you were threatened with fever in Germany.'

'That threatened fever,' rejoined Jesse, 'must ever for the future, as an incident above all others, be remembered with gratitude, since it brought to my side the man and the information I had been for so long in vain looking for. What would have become of me then if he had not appeared, I cannot imagine.'

'And I think it would be unwise, Jesse,' said his father, 'to attempt to imagine. In a short time every doubt in connection with your discovery will, I trust, be set at rest. I have sent to London for my solicitor to come down to me

to-morrow, and I have some hope that Lea will by that time have so far recovered his senses as to be able to answer the few questions we have yet to ask him.'

'I trust he will,' said Mr Cresswell, 'as his answers are of great consequence to you.'

Thus conversing, they continued their walk, Jesse more than once seeking for an excuse to get away into the wood that he might again read his letter, and, all unconsciously, sing and cry and laugh over its contents. He was in an unreasoning state of suppressed emotion, and capable, if he were only alone, of yielding himself up to any extravagance of words or gesture.

At length the opportunity he was in want of unexpectedly presented itself. At a turning of the path in which they were walking they came suddenly upon Dixon, who stood before them with the butt end of his gun on the ground and his hands crossed over the muzzle.

'Why, Dixon,' cried Jesse, 'do you want to spoil both hands at once, that you have them so carefully placed for being blown away?'

'It is not loaded, sir,' replied Dixon, changing his position and stepping aside to let the gentlemen pass.

'Is Smith at home, do you know?' asked Sir Edward.

'No, Sir Edward, he is up in the black wood, and has just sent for me to come to him.'

'And that is why we found you in such a hurry to get to him,' said Jesse, in his old, playful way.

'I thought I heard some one across there, sir, and I stopped to listen.'

'Not poachers, I hope, in the middle of the day.'

'I don't know, sir; but we think they were here last night.'

'Have you found any trace of them?' asked Sir Edward.

'Mr Smith thinks he has, Sir Edward.'

'I wish you would go forward,' said Sir Edward to Jesse, 'and if you see Smith is not particularly engaged, tell him to go at once to his house, where he will find me.'

'Well, Mrs Smith,' he said, as the bustling little woman opened the door in answer to his knock, 'we want you to give us houseroom until your husband returns.'

'He will not be home for some time, I think, Sir Edward.'

'I have sent for him,' he replied, 'and as I

know you will be pleased to accommodate us, we will rest here until he comes.'

They had been but a few minutes in the house when Jesse and Smith appeared at the door.

'So you have had some poachers troubling you, I hear,' said Sir Edward.

'We thought so this morning, Sir Edward,' said Smith; 'but I think it is all a mistake, as we can find no trace of them.'

'How came you to think they had paid you a visit?'

'We got our information from an old, lame man, who has been talking all sorts of nonsense to some of our people. He told them he had seen men go into the preserves with bags and guns, and if they would let him come in with them he would show them which way they went.'

'But they did not take him in with them?' said Sir Edward, in a slightly nervous tone.

'No,' Sir Edward. 'They understood their duty too well for that.'

'Did you see him?'

'No. When then they told me and I went to the place he was gone.'

'Then you know nothing more about him?'

'Nothing more, Sir Edward, than what my

men told me. They said they met him just outside the park, in the path that leads across the fields to Sleaford, and that before he told them about the poachers he inquired to whom the park belonged, and what sort of a house it was of which he could see chimneys over the trees in the distance; and whether it was a large family that lived there; and whether they saw many visitors; and where were their usual drives and walks about the place. And when my men thought he was getting too inquisitive and answered him roughly, he told them about the poachers.'

'He appears to be a stranger,' observed Mr Cresswell.

'I don't know, sir, for my men seemed to think he knew a great deal about the neighbourhood, though he did ask them so many questions. I am sorry I was not with them.'

'You say he was old and lame,' said Jesse; 'but if—'

'No matter what he was,' said Sir Edward. 'A little extra knowledge of the place will do us no harm; but, if he should return, perhaps you will see him yourself, and then, if you think it worth your while, you will be able to take a note or two of his appearance and manners.

But, whatever he may say or do, you will not of course interfere with him in the public road. I came to speak to you about the alterations I was thinking of some time since, but I believe I shall let the matter rest for the present. Oh, by-the-bye,' he said, as he was going out, 'if in your rounds you should see any of the park fence requires repairing, do not fail to point out the defect to the bailiff, that it may be attended to. I have a great dislike to see the fence going unheeded to decay.'

After they had passed a few steps from the house, he said to Jesse,—

'I have to beg your pardon for breaking in so suddenly upon your question and depriving you of his answer. But when I tell you that I have seen this lame, old man myself, and of an incident that he was concerned in a short time since near the park gate, I think you will excuse me for the interruption.'

'I saw that you did not wish me to question him,' replied Jesse; 'but I did not feel that your interruption was in any way offensive.'

'You remember, I have no doubt,' said Sir Edward to Mr Cresswell, 'the last time we drove round the country, a lame, old man got in the way of the horses, and was nearly run over, or appeared to be so?'

'Yes,' replied Mr Cresswell, 'and the coachman was very angry.'

'The man the keepers saw last night, I believe, is the same person.'

'Then he cannot be a very great stranger.'

'He is no stranger,' replied Sir Edward; 'but I am grieved to the heart to say who he is.'

'Then why should you, father?' interposed Jesse.

'Simply,' replied Sir Edward, 'because sooner or later you must both know, and, although I have hesitated to speak of it before, I now feel that the sooner the ordeal is over the better, as it may save us from playing at cross purposes with one another.' He then went on to tell them that in the lame, old man he had recognised the voice of Claypole Lyson.

'Good God!' cried Mr Cresswell, 'what would have happened had Edith also recognised him?'

'The poor consolation that she did not is not left to us,' rejoined Sir Edward sorrowfully, 'as I feared the moment I heard his voice, and knew it for a certainty before she left the carriage.'

'She has never given me the slightest hint of it.'

'Neither from that time till to-day has she to me,' said Sir Edward; 'and I believe she would not now had I not commenced the subject, which was forced upon me through my fear that she was about to leave her present place of safety, and incur a risk of which you and Mrs Cresswell had no suspicion.'

'For what purpose he has assumed his disguise I have no means of knowing. It may be simply to worry you to supply him with money, or it may be to find an opportunity of surprising his wife, and by main force carrying her off from you. While you are here, I suspect it will prove rather a difficult task, but, were you at home or in a strange place, he might find it comparatively easy. It was to induce Edith to raise her voice against going that I ventured to speak to her to-day. I trust what I said to her on the subject has not brought on her present illness, but, even if it has, I do not think I can blame myself for what I have done, as your leaving me at such a time could only have been the means of increasing your anxiety respecting her.'

'Your keeping us here,' said Mr Cresswell, 'cannot have brought on her illness, as it was her illness that led my wife to propose a change of air for her, and my observing her daily in-

creasing depression and weakness that induced me to listen to her.'

'I shall leave it to your judgment,' observed Sir Edward, 'to decide whether you will communicate to Mrs Cresswell the facts I have related to you. I do not see that there can be any reason for further silence. While Edith is confined to her room there can be no fear of her suffering from personal violence, and if she knows that you and her mother are acquainted with the event that has so disturbed her, I should imagine it would have a soothing effect on her mind.'

'I entirely agree with you,' said Mr Cresswell, 'and I shall take the earliest opportunity that presents itself to speak to my wife, and leave her to deal with Edith as she may see fit.'

'I have spoken before you,' said Sir Edward to Jesse, 'to let you see how full and complete my confidence is in you, and that you in turn may rely on me to do in any matter that concerns you what I believe to be right.'

On their return to the Hall they found the report from the sick-room was rather cheering than otherwise. The fever had not increased, and the patient appeared disposed to sleep.

As the evening closed in, and the doctor's

second visit produced no disquieting rumours, the fear that had cast a shadow on every face gradually subsided, and left the inmates of the Hall to their usual quiet and innocent amusements.

Jesse strove to be very agreeable and lively in relating little incidents in his travels to Grace and Oliver, but it was not without difficulty that he kept his mind from wandering from the questions he was, especially by his sister, expected to answer, as if they were the only things in the world in which he need be concerned.

Each passing hour in this eventful period of his life was doing little less than the work of years on his mind compared with past time. Had his hair been grey and his eyes dim, when the hour for retiring to rest came, he could not have bidden good-night to his father before going to his bedroom in a more thoughtful mood than he did on this long-remembered evening of the day, to him, so full of hope and doubt and fear.

The reality of the work he had been engaged in during the last few weeks was now fully impressed upon his mind. Up to the hour of his walking home with his father and Mr Cresswell from the keeper's house, he had had

but a dreamy consciousness of the effect his discovery would have upon his father's position in society, should the marriage in question, on further inquiry, be proved to have been a legal one.

His mind had been so fully occupied in his endeavour to discover the parentage of the children, that anything not immediately connected with it took scarcely any hold upon his imagination. His object was plain and simple, and it engrossed his whole attention. He did not stop to look to the right or to the left, or consider any side issue in the question, while he hurried forward for its solution. But now that his work appeared nearly completed, he felt what its possible effects might be to his father, and almost regretted that he had ever moved in the matter; at a time, too, when he saw how deeply his father was concerned in the welfare of his guests. How great the anxiety their presence occasioned him, and yet how self-sacrificing he was to wish to keep them with him, when he might so easily escape all further trouble and responsibility on their account by silently acquiescing in their departure for Wales or Scotland.

On entering the quiet of his bedroom, and

feeling that he could there indulge undisturbed in thought, he sat down and drew from his pocket his much cherished letter. To a stranger it might have appeared a very simple composition to be read once and then thrown into the fire. But it was not so with Jesse. Although its character was indelibly fixed on his mind, it was still to be preserved with the utmost tenderness and care.

That point having been from the first determined upon, he opened his writing-desk, and in its most secret recess placed the precious document. He then fell back in his chair and gave way to a fit of musing rather than vigorous thought until near midnight. The appearance of the old, lame man to the keepers, and his father's explanation of its probable purpose, gradually assumed a prominent place in his mind, and caused him to wish he could devise some plan by which he could induce Lyson, if not to leave the country, at least to cease from his apparent attempt to worry and frighten the inmates of his father's house.

'If his object is to get money,' he thought, 'surely it would be better to let him have it at once than to suffer months of persecution to be compelled to come to terms with him, with no better result than that which may be now

attainable by a little quiet management. I have heard that every man has his price. I wish I could meet this man, and hear at what price he values his absence from England. Why should I not go over to Downend and see him. If he is very much in want of money he may receive me as a friend, and through me open a business communication with Mr Cresswell.

'I cannot imagine why he did not, on reaching England, come boldly to his father-in-law and explain his grievance to him, if he had any to complain of. It is always a puzzle to me why a man should turn out of the road before him which would seem to be leading him direct to the object he has in view, to reach it through a by-path of trickery and deception. But I have read of men delighting in such a mode of action, who have gone absolutely out of their way to commit a crime for the purpose of bringing about an event which would give them their own only an hour or two before it was due.

'Some spirit of the kind appears to have taken possession of the heart of this man Lyson, if he really has a heart, and is driving him on to destruction. Where could he find a lady more amiable than his wife, with parents more kindly disposed than her father and mother?

'Could I see him, though I might not be able

to convince him of the extent of his folly, still I might be able to bring him to a more reasonable state of mind, and induce him, if by no other means than appealing to his cupidity, to free us from his disagreeable presence and the constant dread there must be, while he is in the neighbourhood, of the outcome of some disquieting occurrence.

'What should hinder me from getting up early to-morrow morning and riding over to Downend? I need not mention my purpose to my father or Mr Cresswell. I will take care that I do not in any manner compromise them in what I say or do. If I find him reasonable I may be the means of doing good, and if I do not, the trouble I have been at for nought will not be very great. Yes, I will go. I can be home again in time for a late breakfast, and unless I have some good news to bring back no one need be the wiser for my morning ride.'

CHAPTER XI.

DAYLIGHT the next morning found Jesse fully resolved on his journey, and in a few minutes from that time he was on a good horse, and passing rapidly over the miles that separated him from the vicarage at Downend. Arrived at his destination, he discovered that the inmates of the house were not early risers. The blinds from most of the windows had not been raised, and the maid who appeared at the door in answer to his summons was obliged to shade her eyes from the light to which they had not yet become accustomed.

'Neither the vicar nor his daughters,' she said, had yet left their rooms, and as for Mr Claypole Lyson, she did not know anything about him. He had a latch-key, and was in and out of the house at all hours night and day, she thought,

for they never knew where to find him when he was wanted.

'I shall stop an hour or two at Downend,' said Jesse, 'and I will call again.'

'I think Miss Lyson will be down in a few minutes,' said the girl, 'for I hear her about in her room.'

Having taken his horse to the inn, and seen that it would be well cared for during his brief stay, he returned to the vicarage, but to receive no welcome from Miss Lyson, who met him at the door, and appeared by her countenance to have swallowed a glass of vinegar or some other liquid equally sour and disagreeable.

'I am afraid I have brought you down before your usual time,' said Jesse.

'No,' replied Miss Lyson; 'I can assure you it would have required more of your family than you to bring me down one moment before it suited my own convenience to come.'

A little disconcerted by this ungracious salutation, Jesse stammered out, 'I know I am very early, but I thought I should perhaps find your brother down.'

'You came to see him, did you?'

'Yes, and to inquire for the vicar.'

'Then,' said Miss Lyson, 'I may tell you

and your friends, for their and your information, that the vicar is very ill in bed through the constant anxiety from which he has of late been suffering.'

'I am very sorry to hear it,' said Jesse.

'You know those who should be much more sorry.'

'May I ask if Mr Lyson is likely to be down soon?'

'I don't know; but the girl can go and ask him.'

In a few seconds the messenger came back with the information that she thought he was out or asleep, for he didn't answer.

'You should have knocked again,' said Miss Lyson; 'but you are so stupid there is no getting you to understand anything. Go back and knock till he answers.'

'And I wonder when my work is to be done if I am to be taken off from it to have to run here and there and nobody knows where,' muttered the girl, as she dragged her reluctant legs upstairs again.

But she did her errand very effectually this time; and had the door of his room not been well made of seasoned wood, it would have gone into pieces under the hard blows she bestowed upon it. Then, in answer to a gruff

inquiry from within, she shouted out at the top of her voice,—

'There's a gentleman at the door as wants to see you directly!'

'Stupid creature!' cried Miss Lyson. 'Why, you are making noise enough to wake the whole village!'

'And it wanted a noise to wake him,' said the girl, as she slipped by her mistress, not quite certain whether she would not be greeted with a box on her ear.

'There,' said Miss Lyson, as a bell was heard to break out into a loud peal,—'now you have roused the vicar, and a fine nervous time we shall have of it with him! I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself, sir, for coming here at this time of the morning and causing so much confusion. There, you can go into the library, if you like. I must go to my father. Perhaps my brother will come to you.'

By the time Jesse was seated in the library he had begun to think that it would have been quite as wise in him if he had remained a couple of hours longer in bed himself, so unpromising did everything appear around him.

In a few minutes the door was opened, but instead of Lyson appearing, in walked, with a stately step and a frowning brow, Miss Dorothy.

She did not condescend to notice Jesse's rising and politely bowing to her, but sternly intent on the mission that had brought her there, said,—

'I understand you wish to see my brother. I have to tell you that he will not be down for some time.'

'I am sorry for that, as I am afraid it will oblige me to return without seeing him.'

'You can leave your message with me, which will be the same thing.'

'I have no message for him.'

'Then, in the name of goodness,' exclaimed Dorothy, 'what brought you here?'

'If I were not afraid of giving offence,' replied Jesse, 'I should be tempted to say a good horse, but the truth is, I came over on my own account to see your brother.'

'But can you not understand what I mean when I tell you he will not be down for some time? Tell me what you would say to him, and I will give you his answer.'

'I do not see how you can undertake to do that,' said Jesse, 'before you know upon what ground I wish to see him.'

'Have you no shame in you!' exclaimed Dorothy; 'that a mere boy like you should take upon yourself to speak to me in such a manner?

But it is just like you; you always were a little pert, unmannerly boy; but that is not very surprising, considering the example you have constantly set before you at home.'

'You are a lady, and I am in your father's house,' said Jesse, 'and therefore I must bear patiently with you.'

'Bear patiently with me, indeed!' cried Dorothy; 'and you, a mere boy, to talk in such a way to me—yes, to me, who am old enough to be your mother!'

'I did not come here to dispute your age.'

'Impudent fellow! Leave the room, sir!'

'I came to see Mr Lyson.'

Dorothy took a step towards Jesse, with upraised hands, in a menacing manner, when the door opened, and Miss Lyson entered, exclaiming as she did so,—

'Dorothy, Dorothy, you must not talk so loud! You are driving papa crazy; you must be quiet!'

'Quiet!' said Dorothy between her clenched teeth. 'How can one be quiet when suffering from the insults of such a boy as that?'

'Has he insulted you?' inquired Miss Lyson.

'Yes—grossly,' was the reply. 'I told him

our brother would not be down for some time, and—'

'You made a mistake,' said Lyson, who had softly entered the room behind her in his dressing-gown and slippers. 'Here I am, able to attend to my own business.'

'I only told him,' said Dorothy, 'that if he had any message for you he might give it to me, and I—'

'And he would not,' cried Lyson, interrupting her again; 'and quite right, too,' he added. 'How could anything he had to say to me concern you? I have not the honour of a personal acquaintance with the young gentleman, but I believe I am in the presence of Mr Jesse Harewood?'

'I am that person, sir,' said Jesse.

'Pray, be seated,' said Lyson.

The sisters seeing or fancying that a conversation of some importance was about to take place, sat down, with a most determined air, to help their brother.

'Is it not near breakfast-time?' asked Lyson.

'Oh dear, no, brother!' came from both sisters.

'I should like to have mine as soon as possible.'

'It shall be ready as soon as you are ready for it,' said Miss Lyson.

'Then I am ready for it now,' said Lyson angrily.

'We are stopping to act as witnesses, and—'

'Rather as simpletons,' retorted Lyson.

'Are you mad, brother?' said Dorothy.

'Not so mad,' said Lyson, 'as you and your sister are foolish. Will you leave the room, or shall I take Mr Harewood up to my bedroom? How many times am I to tell you that I will not have you interfere in my affairs?'

The sisters seeing that he would not be trifled with, rose from their seats and made for the door, whispering something rather loudly to each other that trouble was making their brother quite another creature, and they were afraid he would have a fit or lose his senses.

The amiable brother went with them to the door, and after having seen them safely on the other side, closed it and turned the key, saying half aloud as he did so,—

'That is the only way of dealing with over-curious women.' He then returned to Jesse, and seating himself, said,—'I was scarcely prepared for so early a visit.'

'And I am almost sorry that I made it,'

rejoined Jesse, 'as I appear to have created no little confusion in the house.'

'A mere trifle,' said Lyson. 'We are used to that sort of thing here. Will you let me know in a few words the object of your visit. You see I am but half-dressed.'

'I was with my father yesterday at the keeper's house,' said Jesse, going direct to the point, 'when we heard of your being in the neighbourhood.'

'And if I was,' said Lyson, colouring, 'was not the road as free to me as to others?'

'Certainly, no one will dispute that,' replied Jesse, 'but from what I heard, I thought you wished to obtain an interview with some one at Woodfield.'

'And suppose I did?' said Lyson moodily.

'After returning to my room last night,' replied Jesse, 'a thought struck me that I would ride over to Downend and offer my services to you for any communication you might wish to open, and here I am ready to undertake the task.'

'You have not been prompted by any one?'

'No, I came simply on my own impulse.'

'And you have no message for me?'

'No, nothing of the sort.'

'Then you cannot have had much experi-

ence in the ways of the world to undertake such a task. Have you a proposition to make to me?'

'No,' replied Jesse, 'I came on the supposition that I might take a message from you, and save you from going about the country in disguise to obtain that which I could do for you at so little cost to myself.'

'I don't know what you mean by little cost to yourself. Is your life of so little value to you? Do you know that you are in the presence of a desperate man, who would not hesitate to put a bullet through an enemy?'

'But I am not an enemy.'

'You are living with those who are,' cried Lyson, struggling in vain to subdue the passion that was raging in his heart, 'and if you want a message to him from me you shall have it.'

'I will be the bearer of no angry messages.'

'Then go away, go away! Why should the innocent suffer for the guilty? Do not come within my reach, or I may think you are your father, and strike you dead at my feet.'

'Has my father, then, so grievously offended you?'

'Offended me, did you say? He has ruined me, body and soul. For years I have, through his villainy, lived an exile from my country and friends, and when, after years of absence, I

returned here, resolved on obtaining justice, I am circumvented, and the man on whom I chiefly depended has been conjured away by the arts and open purse, I doubt not, of my arch-enemy.'

'Your words are riddles to me,' said Jesse.

'Then as riddles let them remain,' retorted Lyson, 'till I am able to say I am revenged.'

'May I ask if you are in want of money?'

'Ask a poor man if he is in want of money!' said Lyson bitterly. 'Did you ever know a poor man who was not in want of money? Now listen to me. You appear honest and unskilled in the ways of the world. Take this message from me to your father. Tell him that when I came home to see my dying father, I thought a few days here would serve for that and another purpose I had in view. That I expected a friend would come to me and act as my right hand. He came, but was instantly conjured away, and I have not seen him since. Tell him if this friend of mine has been bought over, as I know he must have been, to see things in a different light to what he did, if he is not sent back to me within a week from to-day I will take measures to ensure a safe and quick revenge.'

'Is that all you have to say to him?'

'Are you his son, and ask if that is all?'

'You have attached no conditions to your message.'

'What conditions would you have?'

'Suppose my father is not the bad man you appear to think he is?'

'But I know he is!' exclaimed Lyson.

'You must be labouring under some strange delusion,' said Jesse, 'of which I am so fully persuaded, that within the week I will take upon myself the responsibility of undeceiving you.'

'And if you fail?'

At this point their conversation was interrupted by the maid knocking lustily at the door, and exclaiming,—

'Here's another gentleman wants to see you, sir.'

'Tell him to come in,' shouted Lyson in return. 'Oh! I see the door is locked,' and with that he moved towards it to let the gentleman in.

'Ah! my good friend,' said Circum, who had just arrived from Bath. 'You are taking it easy this morning, in your dressing-gown and slippers.'

So utter was the confusion of Lyson at Circum's sudden appearance, that he completely, for some seconds, lost the power of speech. He

looked in turn, first at him and then at Jesse, as if in the expectation of seeing some mark of recognition pass between them. A deceiver himself, he looked for deception in others. Circum's long absence, since his sudden and unexpected departure, had, day by day, been more difficult for him to bear. He knew full well that Circum, like himself, was ruled by self-interest, and he could imagine no other cause for his long silence, but that he had been bought off by Sir Edward, and smuggled out of the country, or hidden in some out-of-the-way place, until he should be wanted to give evidence on the opposite side. To discover the truth, he had assumed his disguise, to enable him to carry on secretly his inquiries at Woodfield.

'Well,' said Circum, after waiting a while for a reply to his greeting, 'am I to consider myself an unwelcome visitor?'

'What game are you upon now?' stammered Lyson. 'Are you here to carry out some further act of deception? You look as if you did not know the gentleman before you.'

'Do I?' said Circum; 'then there is not much deception in that. Do you take me for a rogue?'

'As our business appears settled,' said Jesse, 'I will bid you good morning.'

'Stop one minute,' said Lyson; 'I may have been a little hasty in the opinion I formed of my friend. I hope I have been so,' and he fixed his eyes searchingly upon Circum, as he added, 'are you as you were?'

'What do you mean? How else should I be?'

'You are prepared to go on with your work?'

'Yes,' was the brief reply.

'When?'

'This instant; I am here for the purpose.'

'Then,' said Lyson to Jesse, 'you need take no further message from me to your father, than that he shall hear from me in the course of the day. This is Mr Jesse Harewood, I may tell you,' added Lyson, 'as you do not appear to know him.'

'The youngest son, I believe,' said Circum, addressing him; 'and to convince my friend that I am in earnest, I will give you a little information, which will doubtless prove very interesting to you, though you may not feel it the personal matter you would have done had you stood the next to your father. You do not appear to be paying much attention to what I am saying.'

'There is a little fog between us, I think,' said Jesse.

'You are rather a cool hand for your age'

thought Circum; but he said aloud, 'If you will give me your attention for a few seconds, I will endeavour to remove the fog, as you call it. You will doubtless be surprised to hear that your father has, under his own eye, the rightful heir to the estate that he has so long held in wrongful possession.'

'You are making a bold assertion, sir,' said Jesse, not a little surprised to hear the subject that had so earnestly occupied his attention alluded to in such a manner by a stranger.

'Not more bold than true,' rejoined Circum, 'which I will undertake to prove to you very shortly.'

'As I am not the eldest son,' said Jesse, 'you must excuse me for not being more excited by your speech.'

'Too young to understand the consequence of it to you and your whole family?'

'Perhaps so,' said Jesse, and left the room without having raised the slightest suspicion in the minds of the conspirators that he had been previously acquainted with the subject.

'Have you had any conversation with him before this morning?' asked Circum.

'Never a word.'

'He is a clever fellow or a great fool,' said Circum.

'Enough of him,' cried Lyson. 'Tell me where you have been and what you have been doing since your strange disappearance. Why did you not write to me? You carried away my letters, and drove me almost mad by leaving me here ignorant of what you were doing. Have you been in London all this time? If so, where? I have written to you at your old address two or three times, but have had neither answer from you nor my letters returned from the dead-letter office.'

'I have been to France and to Bath, and am now with you ready for the fight.'

'France and Bath!' said Lyson; 'I don't see what business you had at either place.'

'I went to France,' rejoined Circum, 'to see two old friends that we shall find needful in our cause. They had a little business of their own on hand, and kept me to help them.'

'But they were not successful,' said Lyson.

'No; they were not.'

'Of course they were not. I knew as much. If they had been, I might have fretted here for another month while you were enjoying yourself there with them.'

'You are growing suspicious,' said Circum.

'You make me so.'

'Nonsense. Have I not sworn to be true to you?'

'Well; what of your Bath journey?'

'I found the youth difficult to deal with,' said Circum, 'until I forced him to understand that I could prove he was the lawful heir to the title and property. Then he became a little more tractable, and still more so when I placed the good name of his mother before him, and worked him well upon that score. I told him if he did not care for the title himself, his mother's and his sister's reputation ought to be dear to him. That even simple duty would compel him, for their sakes, to act in a becoming manner. That he was the grandson of the late Sir Henry Harewood would undoubtedly be proved; but the proof of his legitimacy would, in a great measure, depend on the interest he took in the question. I believe I have secured him.'

'But he has been entirely under the influence of the Woodfield people; and what will happen if he should rush back to them in your absence and seek for their advice?'

'I have provided against that by getting him to promise that he would not go or write

to Woodfield until he heard from his sister. I was pleased to see that he did not quite understand why his sister was sent to London, and appeared a little nettled that it was done without his knowledge. I threw out a hint or two that, perhaps if he pressed her upon the subject, he would have little reason to be satisfied with the treatment of her so-called friends. If I am not mistaken, I have planted a serious doubt in his mind of the unselfishness of his Woodfield patron, and which, through his sister, I shall soon be able to nurse. One step he may take with her, or seem to take, in opposition to the will of the great man, will place him entirely in our hands. We shall have the choice of supplying him with a solicitor, and if we do not succeed, it will be our own fault. And now tell me what you have done. Have you any witnesses for the proof?'

'My sisters would have overwhelmed me with proofs if I would have listened to them; but I grew sick of the whole matter, and only thought of revenge.'

'A very foolish way of spending your time.'

'It chiefly arose from your apparent desertion.'

'More foolish still; but as you said of the youth who has just left us, enough of that.'

'Please, sir,' said the maid, as she opened the door, 'mistress says breakfast will soon be ready, and ain't you going to dress yourself?'

'Tell your mistress that I shall have a gentleman to breakfast with me this morning.'

'I don't think there will be butter enough, sir.'

'Do as I bid you,' said Lyson sharply; 'and now,' he added to Circum, 'if you will come to my room, we can save a little time by talking while I am dressing.'

CHAPTER XII.

ON leaving the vicarage Jesse felt that he had, for the time, only one object in view, and that was to get home again as quick as possible, and make his father acquainted with the state of affairs as they had just been disclosed to him. He was utterly confounded with the reception he had met with from the ladies. Their bitterness of feeling he could not understand. In setting out on his visit he had taken no thought of them. His business was simply to see Lyson, and do his best to put an end to the present unsatisfactory state of things.

If he had once thought of the sisters, it would only have been to assure himself that they would have received him as a friend, and readily worked with him to bring about the result he desired. He had no confidence in their judgment; still, he believed, they were

greatly attached to their brother, and would do their utmost to assist in any project that promised to prove beneficial to him. But he had not thought of them, and was in no way prepared for the reception he met with.

But despite the annoyance they had occasioned him by their display of temper, he could not, as he thought of it on his way home, feel sorry for the apparently uncouth part he had played, as it had served to bring out more fully the dominant feelings of their hearts. He was at a loss to understand why they were so angry with his father. What could he have done that was so very displeasing to them? He could conceive no cause for it but that they had been simply influenced by their brother to cherish the bitterness they evidently did against him.

And what with respect to Lyson himself,—what could the cause of his wild and ungovernable attack upon his father have arisen from? Was it only because he had under his roof Mr and Mrs Cresswell and their daughter, or did he really believe, as his words seemed to imply, that he had in secret been acting as his enemy. That he was suffering from some strange delusion was very apparent, difficult as it might be to understand from what it could have arisen.

Whether it was from the effects of drink or the softening of his brain it seemed equally serious, and to require immediate attention.

Then the unaccountable appearance of the stranger, and the evident knowledge he had of the family history, and especially that part of it which had of late so fully engrossed his attention passed before his mind's eye, but he could come to no conclusion respecting him. Who he was or where he came from he had, from what had passed, no means of judging. Of one thing only could he feel certain, for of that there could be no doubt. The fact was as plain as any unacknowledged fact could be, that the stranger and Lyson were not only old friends, but that a league existed between them for the purpose of involving his father in a world of trouble, if not of final ruin. The only gleam of comfort he had in his homeward journey was that, if they carried out their expressed intention the trial would be quickly over, and the anxiety about what was to come in the future would soon be lost in the certainty of the present.

Come the blow from them as forcible as it might, it would be better to have its full effect to deal with at once than to go on in trembling fear and doubt of the power of men who must

keep one ever on the watch and guard against their secret machinations. 'Dark, indeed,' he thought, 'must be the event which can be more difficult to bear than when in uncertainty—its shadow frowns upon us out of the unseen future, through our imagination and dread of its unknown power. Yes, it is a good thing to feel that it will be soon over,' thought Jesse, as he alighted from his horse at the end of his journey.

'Why, Jesse!' cried Oliver, as he met him at the door, 'have I found you at last? I have been looking for you for the last two hours.'

'I have been out for a little exercise.'

'Not for a little only, I should think,' rejoined Oliver, 'by the look of your horse.'

'He was fresh, and I let him have his own way,' said Jesse; 'but I did not know he was so warm, as I now see he is. And how goes on the business of the day with you?'

'I have been out for a run with Grace through the village,' replied Oliver; 'she said she wanted very much to see Nancy set off Jasper for his day's work, so I took her, and some fine fun we had, I can tell you. The first thing we saw was Nancy coming up the road towards us, and I heard her call out when

ever so far off, 'Oh, sir, have you seen my husband? I have lost him. Instead of putting the horse in the cart, he's gone off gossiping somewhere, and I won't have it.'

'I think I saw him go into Mrs Nash's shop,' I said.

'"Did you, though!" she cried; "then I'll soon have him out again;" and very soon there was such a noise in the shop that I thought something serious would happen. But it was soon over, and out marched Jasper with Nancy's hand on his shoulder, as she said, "Go away to your work. I won't have you talking to Miss Nash. You are my husband, and I am your wife, and you have no business with anybody else."'

'And how did Jasper take it?'

'Oh, that and a great deal more like a lamb.'

'Like a donkey, I should rather think,' said Jesse. He then added, 'Have you seen father lately?'

'Yes; he is just gone into the library with Mr Cresswell.'

'But have you had your breakfast?'

'I shall have plenty of time for that,' he replied, as he hurried away. He had stopped with Oliver more to cool himself than to listen to him about Nancy. In a few minutes he was

in the presence of the gentlemen, and recounting to them his proceedings of the morning. He was at first taken a little aback by the manner in which his father received his intelligence.

'I am afraid,' he said, when he heard where his son had been and the object of his going, 'I must charge you with rashness for undertaking such a journey without having even hinted at your purpose either to me or Mr Cresswell.'

'I did not settle it with myself until near midnight.'

'It would have been well,' observed Mr Cresswell, 'if you had waited to see one or both of us before you set out this morning; but if your usual good fortune has attended you, we may have no reason to regret that you did not wait for our opinion of your project.'

'Had I gone with the intention of transacting business without your knowledge I should feel that I deserved censure, but I merely went to discover the state of Mr Lyson's mind, and learn if he had any suggestions he wished to have conveyed to you without the formality of putting them on paper.'

'There could be no great harm in that,' said Mr Cresswell.

Sir Edward remained silent, but his countenance gave no evidence that he was satisfied until he had listened to all that had taken place, and in the end received an account of the message that had first been sent to him. Then the frown passed from his brow, and a smile of satisfaction appeared on his lips.

'Whether it is your good fortune or your judgment that has been your guide, Jesse,' he said, 'we will not stop to inquire; but there is no denying the fact that you have done us good service in discovering what is about to happen some two or three hours before the event can come upon us.'

'This appearance of the stranger with his knowledge of your family is most extraordinary,' observed Mr Cresswell; 'but until we know something more of him and the ground upon which he rests to enforce his threats, we cannot form a correct opinion of his power. Of Lyson's desire for revenge on account of some imaginary wrong you have done him I take little heed. It seems to have proceeded from a heated brain, arising from drink or ungovernable passion.'

'I do not fear any injury he can do me,' said Sir Edward, 'though it is unpleasant to have to deal with such a man. The presence of Mr

Sims, my solicitor, here to-day, will go far, without loss of time, to let us understand our real position.'

'Yes,' observed Mr Cresswell, 'however much we might, through our ignorance of the law, be perplexed by their threats, he will be free from anything of the kind, and will soon discover—what I believe the truth will prove—that they have entered into a conspiracy against us to extort money.'

'What we should have done,' remarked Sir Edward, 'without the information Jesse brought us from Germany, I cannot conceive. What would have given us months, and perhaps years, to trace out, we have now before us in full; and we can have now no reason to oppose any claim they may make in the children's interest, further than what relates to the legality of the marriage in question. If they fail in the proof of that, their contention with me must end.'

'As you do not censure me for my morning's work,' said Jesse, 'I will leave you now, as Oliver is a little anxious about my breakfast.'

'Not had your breakfast yet!' said Mr Cresswell. 'Then, if you do not disappear this instant to get it, I shall take the liberty of quickening your movement by the aid of my walking-stick.'

'Thank you,' said Jesse, with one of his old laughs, 'but I will not trouble you to rise.'

The conversation between the two gentlemen did not cease with the departure of Jesse. The information they had received from him, reviewed under different aspects, gave full scope for their imaginations to feed upon. Who, or from whence, came the stranger? What did he really know of the matter of which he declared himself to be so well informed? What was the connection between him and Lyson? with many other like questions, rose to their lips, but were obliged to be left unanswered.

About mid-day Circum presented himself at the front door of the Hall, and inquired if Sir Edward Harewood was at home.

The servant who answered the door was not one amongst the number of those who had seen him on his former visit to the old steward, and therefore there was no awkward recognition between them to take place. A simple, 'Yes, sir,' was the reply.

Circum having made a little unnecessary display with his card-case, drew out a card and gave it to the man, as he said,—

'Have the goodness to take that to Sir Edward, and say that the gentleman who pro-

mised to pay him a vist from Downend would be glad to speak with him.'

Mr Cresswell had left the room a few minutes before to go to his daughter, and Sir Edward was not sorry that it was so, as he felt he could get a firmer grasp of the subject with the stranger alone than in the presence of a third person, who might, by some inadvertent question, divert his mind from the real point at issue.

'Show the gentleman in,' he said, as he glanced at the card the servant had placed in his hand.

Jesse had made no allusion to the personal appearance of the stranger, and Sir Edward was not a little surprised that, instead of finding a rough uncultivated man, as his message would seem to imply, enter the room, he saw a calm-featured, gentlemanly-looking old man, very carefully dressed, with his hair and beard white with age.

Sir Edward involuntarily rose to receive him, and then, pointing to a chair, said,—'Pray, be seated,' as he resumed his former position.

'A favourable first impression,' thought Circum, 'is half the battle,' as he seated himself with a smile on his lips, and said in his blandest tones,—'Thank you, Sir Edward.'

'You have called upon me,' said Sir Edward,

'on what, I suppose, must prove an unpleasant business, at least to one of us.'

'Rather say both,' rejoined Circum, 'for in truth this sort of thing always gives me pain when I read of it in the public papers; therefore it is unnecessary that I should attempt to tell you that it must be painful indeed to me to be called upon to take an active part in such a proceeding.'

'I shall be glad,' said Sir Edward, a little impatiently, 'if you will plainly, and in as few words as possible, make me acquainted with the object of your visit.'

'I shall very readily comply with your request, Sir Edward, as I take a little pride to myself for being a plain man and of few words. When I had the honour of seeing your son this morning, that I might not surprise you with an unexpected visit, I begged him to inform you of my coming.'

'And he did so.'

'He appeared to me,' continued Circum, 'to be a young gentleman of very excellent parts; but I was sorry to find, after he had left the vicarage, that he and my friend Lyson, during a part of their conversation, had had the misfortune to misunderstand each other. Now, before I proceed with the subject that brought

me here, I must confess that my friend is at times a little excitable. He told me he was afraid he lost his temper this morning while under the impression that he had been injured. In his name, permit me, Sir Edward, to withdraw any expression that was in the least degree offensive to your son, and to add that he is sorry that he spoke while under the influence of anger.'

'Will you proceed to business, sir?' said Sir Edward.

'Yes, I will, Sir Edward; for, sorry as I am to invade your quiet, I must do my duty,—of course you will understand that I refer to these two children who have been from their infancy under your protection. At present I think I need not enter into an elaborate explanation of the reason of your being so long left undisturbed in the possession of this noble estate. It will doubtless suffice to satisfy you, when I tell you I am the oldest representative of the family of the mother of the boy whose claim I am here to warn you I intend to set up in opposition to yours. I will tell you in a few words why this has not been done before. To within the last six months I had an elder brother who was of a dull, languid temperament, and who paid little attention to his duty when it lay in the rough

path of life, or would take him from his easy-chair. His death has thrown this burden upon me, and I dare not follow his example. That which should have been done by him has become my work, and, disagreeable as the task is, I must not attempt to shun it; and, therefore, I am here to assert Edmund Montag's claim to this grand property!'

'It is easy to make the assertion,' said Sir Edward; 'but I think you will find it a difficult matter to prove that he is related to my family by any other tie than that which my protection has afforded him.'

'His mother was your cousin's wife?'

'You will assert that.'

'Yes, and prove it too,' replied Circum.

'Then you have the proof in your hands?'

'Yes, step by step I have worked upon it until it has brought me to your door.'

'Have you your papers with you?' asked Sir Edward.

'No, my solicitor has them in London. This visit, I may tell you, I wish you to regard as only preliminary. I am not naturally, as you must by this time have observed, a hard man, and as you have been very kind to the children, I am disposed, although I have placed the papers in the hands of my solicitor, to treat it

as a family question, and thus avoid the expense and worry of litigation.'

'You appear to have taken a very sensible view of the question,' said Sir Edward, 'and I am disposed to do the same myself, but as I seldom act in any matter without the advice of my solicitor, you must give me a little time before I ask you for your proposal.'

'I beg to warn you,' said Circum, 'of what you may be called upon to do under the advice of your solicitor, unless you are prepared to carry it out to the bitter end. My solicitor is so satisfied with the justice of the young man's claim, that he is eager we should commence our suit without a moment's delay.'

'Am I to understand that this is all you wish to say?' asked Sir Edward.

'Yes; but I must beg you to bear in mind that no time is to be lost.'

'There shall be no unnecessary delay on my part,' said Sir Edward, as he rose from his chair to ring the bell.

'One moment, if you please,' said Circum, still remaining seated. Sir Edward resumed his seat with an impatient gesture, and the speaker continued. 'If the subject upon which we have been speaking has been painful to me,

doubly so is another, which at the request of my friend Lyson, I have undertaken to perform for him.'

'Sir,' rejoined Sir Edward, 'I can receive no communication through you from him. I apprehend there is sufficient paper in the vicarage for his purpose if he has any proposition to make to me.'

'There are some subjects,' said Circum, 'that gentlemen do not like to commit to paper, unless they are in love, or something of that sort. Pray, do not touch the bell until you have heard me, or you may have reason to regret your impatience.'

'I do not understand you, sir,' said Sir Edward sternly.

'I am a man of peace as well as of few words,' said Circum; 'and I would gladly offer my services as a mutual friend to avoid a great scandal. If you treat my advice with contumely, do not, when it is too late, say I was not plain with you.'

'I am not aware, sir,' said Sir Edward proudly, 'that I have any want of the services of a mutual friend, and certainly not of your friend's choosing.'

'You mistake me, Sir Edward; I am not of his choosing. I offer my services to you

both, for the sake of peace. Strange,' he said half to himself, 'that men cannot see facts affecting their own characters as others see them.'

'What facts would you have me see?' said Sir Edward hastily.

'You are, permit me to say,' replied Circum, 'under the influence of anger; and therefore I feel I ought not to press you further.'

'Speak out, man, if you have anything you wish to say,' cried Sir Edward, 'and then leave the room, for I will not answer you again.'

'You ask what fact I would have you see, said Circum; 'I answer the simple one that you are now keeping in your house my friend's wife, for what purpose you best know, though you cannot see how far the law will hold you blameless until the case is brought into court. You may be very innocent, but—'

'Leave the room, sir!' exclaimed Sir Edward, as he gave the bell-pull a violent jerk.

'I was going to observe,' said Circum, 'that proofs would not be wanting, and that I have, in your own handwriting, expressions of your passionate love for the lady.'

'It is false!' cried Sir Edward; 'I have never written a word of the sort or kind to her.'

'Will you say of her?' asked Circum in a cold, passionless tone.

Here the servant appeared at the door, and Sir Edward, undecided what course to adopt, seeing his unwelcome visitor remained firmly fixed in his chair, said,—

'I rang, but I do not want you now.'

'Wisely spoken,' murmured Circum, loud enough to be heard when the servant had closed the door. 'And now, perhaps you will allow me to say, before I willingly take my departure, one or two words respecting the letters, the hinting at which so greatly excited you when your hand was on the bell-pull. They were written, I may remind you, many years since, of one who was, at the time, virtually your friend's wife. Why he has not spoken or written to you since you may not be able to conceive the reason, but I believe others will when the case comes before the public. What! have I touched your self-interest? I see you would not like the letters to go before the curious eyes of the public.'

'I do not care for the eyes of the public,' said Sir Edward; 'but there are reasons which make me feel, if such letters are extant, they should be destroyed.'

'I thought as much,' retorted Circum. 'Then

let me assure you that they are extant; and since you have rejected my friendly advances, they must fall into hands which will deal less scrupulously with them than I would have done.'

'Are they for sale?' asked Sir Edward.

'You have rejected my services,' replied Circum, 'and now I wipe my hands clean of the whole affair. But I will say this much, I will send your question to my friend, and if, in your cooler moments, you remember something you have neglected to say, you may hear of me at the carrier's house in the village, where I am staying for a few days. Good morning, Sir Edward, I will not trouble you to ring for the servant, I can let myself out,' and without another word, he was suffered to depart. As soon as he was gone, Sir Edward took two or three hasty turns up and down the room, then threw himself into a chair, and pressing his hand to his eyes, one of the most important scenes of his early life he lived over again. How painful the scene was to him might possibly be imagined by one if he had listened to the stifled sobs, and seen the upheaving of his shoulders as he leaned forward on the table before him.

'Wretched man!' he murmured; 'did I de-

serve this? Was it not enough to strike me then to the heart, but you must now torment me by tearing open the wound afresh. Have I striven so long to hide other than a brother's love for Edith from all eyes, now to have it flaunted openly before the public. What would I give if I had never trusted that man—never written those confiding letters which he so cunningly drew from me at the time of his falsehood to blind me to his work, and now to curse me with its remembrance.

'What can I do? Whom can I trust to negotiate for the letters that contain the secret of my life? No one; and, hateful as the task is, I must undertake it for myself, or suffer in default. I dare not let the witness of my love for Edith go abroad, as it would condemn me to perpetual banishment from her presence. How could she meet me and speak to me in her old way with the awakened consciousness that I had desired to be something more to her than a brother? Must she not shun me as her direst foe, lest I should tempt her from the indulgence of sinful thoughts to sinful deeds?

'Yes, hateful as the task will be, I must see that man again, and at all cost obtain the letters. Once they are reduced to ashes, I will not fear the tongue of scandal. It may touch my temper,

but nothing more. Who the man is that Lyson has called to his aid signifies but little. He may or he may not be the person he represents himself. To imagine that he came to me to perform a simple act of kindness as to a friend would be extreme folly. He a man of peace! Foolish old man, to think I could so easily be imposed upon.'

How much longer this communing with himself might have continued it is not easy to surmise. It was interrupted by Mr Cresswell, who, having spent some time with his wife and Edith, returned to the library.

'Well,' he said, on entering, 'so you have had your promised visitor. I would fain say I hope the interview has proved satisfactory, but, judging from the expression of your face, I dare not indulge the hope.'

'Let us take a turn in the open air,' said Sir Edward. 'This room is insufferably hot.'

CHAPTER XIII.

SHORTLY after luncheon, which had been a very formal affair to all but Oliver and Grace, the anxiously-expected Mr Sims, Sir Edward's solicitor, arrived from London. He was a middle-aged man, with a firm-set lip and an eye that appeared ever on the watch to pierce the disguise of any sham that came before him. No time was lost after his arrival before he was seated in the library with Sir Edward, Mr Cresswell, and Jesse.

The first thing to be done was to make him acquainted with Jesse's discovery of the parentage of Edmund and Lizzie Montag. He listened attentively to Jesse's report, put in a question here and there, but abstained from any general remark until it was finished. He then gave it as his opinion that the case might have proved very serious if the investigation had

been the work of an enemy, concluding with,—'The question of the legality of the marriage is no concern of yours as long as it is not attempted to be proved by others.'

'But we are threatened with the attempt,' said Sir Edward. And he then gave a brief report of that part of his conversation with Circum which related to the property.

The tone of satisfaction which had pervaded the face of Mr Sims gradually disappeared as he listened to the additional account.

'This is a new feature in the case,' he said, when it was finished, 'and one Mr Jesse's report did not prepare me for. It appears I gave him credit for having acted with more caution than I now learn he did. How could you,' he said to Jesse, 'have suffered such a matter as this to have passed from your lips to the ears of a stranger?'

'I have not done so,' said Jesse firmly.

'It will be a very strange coincidence,' said Mr Sims, 'if his information and yours, which are in all essentials alike, should have been derived from sources independent of one another.'

'I am perfectly satisfied they come from different sources,' said Jesse; 'but how, I cannot tell.'

'You had no clever companion in your journey?'

'No; and I did not go into the matter with any one besides the gentlemen I have named, and I cannot imagine that either of them played me false.'

'It is well,' said Mr Sims, 'that we have the whole question in so small a compass. You must see your visitor of this morning again, and discover who and what he is, and if possible, by some indirect means, how far his relationship to the children is based on truth.'

'I would rather,' rejoined Sir Edward, 'dare him on the instant to produce his proofs that he is the person he professes himself to be. I do not see what I can gain by going indirectly to work. If the youth I have looked upon as an unknown orphan is indeed the legal offspring of my late uncle, though he at the time of his death was, I am persuaded, unacquainted with the fact, I shall not want the law to force me to yield up my fancied rights to him.'

'That sort of thing would do all very well in a romantic story,' said Mr Sims, 'but we have in this case to deal with realities which must not be trifled with. Whether his statement is true or false, you must not too readily treat him as an enemy. Though in the end he may fail

to establish his claim, still out of pure mischief, if not for the chance of success, he can run you to a ruinous expense, so that your winning or losing your suit would become comparatively a matter of indifference.'

'You are here in answer to my call for advice,' said Sir Edward, 'and I should but ill requite your attention by showing a disposition to dispute the correctness of your views. May I ask you, then, to take the management of the whole affair into your own hands and treat it as your own?'

'If it were indeed my own,' said Mr Sims, 'I should by all the means in my power bring it to a close as quickly as possible. Where is the stranger now to be found?'

'At his lodgings in the village, I presume,' replied Sir Edward. 'Will you go there alone to him, or shall I send for him to meet us here?'

'I think I would prefer seeing him alone first. He is lodging, he told me, at the carrier's in the village.'

'Will you have some one to go with you to show you the house?'

'Thank you, no—I will go alone.'

He left anxious hearts behind him, while he, cool and collected, passed through the village to the place of his destination.

It was not by accident that he found the stranger at home. The clever old man had left Sir Edward under the impression that he should soon be wanted again, and now, after having had a good long gossip with Nancy, he was quietly awaiting the summons.

'Yes, he is at home, sir,' said Nancy, in answer to Mr Sims, 'but I don't think he can see you indoors, because he said he would soon be going out.'

'Tell him a gentleman from the Hall will be glad to speak to him.'

'Yes, sir, that I will; and then he can do as he likes, can't he?'

Without waiting for an answer she disappeared, but quickly returning said,—'Yes, sir, it is all right, you can go in.'

Circum flushed up a little when Mr Sims entered his room. He had expected to see Sir Edward, or his son, but he received his visitor very graciously, and having begged him to be seated, awaited in his own quiet manner for what was to come.

'I suppose,' said Mr Sims, 'that we are both men of the world, and therefore I shall use little prelude to the business that has brought me here. I have come as the friend of Sir Edward Harewood, to have a few words with

you upon the subject, of the orphan children, you brought before him this morning.'

'You are his legal adviser, I presume,' said Circum; 'and have been summoned from town by telegram?'

'I am Sir Edward's legal adviser,' said Mr Sims, 'but you are wrong in supposing I have been hastily summoned by telegram to confer with you. I was invited to the Hall by letter yesterday.'

'Then,' replied Circum, 'a lucky chance appears to have brought you here at a very convenient time for Sir Edward Harewood.'

'Perhaps so,' said Mr Sims.

'You have some communication to make to me.'

'Yes,' replied Mr Sims, 'if you will first permit me to ask you a few questions respecting the communication you made to Sir Edward this morning.'

'Truth does not require to be guarded by equivocation or disguise,' replied Circum. 'If you will speak plainly, I will listen to your questions, and answer them immediately.'

'You say you are the eldest living branch of a certain family?'

'Yes.'

'And that you can prove it to the satisfaction of any unprejudiced mind?'

'Yes.'

'Can you oblige me with the nature of this proof?'

'I do not see,' said Circum, 'how you can honestly make such a request at this point of our proceeding; but, fearless as I am of not being able to satisfy you, my answer is, I can have two affidavits sworn to by gentlemen in France, and to come still closer to the question, I have the dim recollection of Miss Montag herself, of her having seen me in her childhood, as the acknowledged brother of her mother, and the certain fact that, at a critical period of my life, I was well-known in Germany to Sir Edward's late steward.'

'That is coming near the point, indeed,' said Mr Sims; 'and you made Sir Edward acquainted with these facts this morning?'

'No; but I would have done so if he had not so impatiently listened to me.'

'And you can prove that the marriage of the son of the late Sir Henry Harewood was legally performed?'

'I can,' replied Circum, 'for I was present myself as a witness.'

'As your answers,' said Mr Sims, 'appear

clear and unstudied, I will now give you Sir Edward's message. He bid me say that, on your request, he will render you every assistance in his power to have the case brought before the court, and decided.'

'But is he aware of the expense of such a process?'

'What other course can he adopt?'

'Can he not, as I said to him this morning, arrange the affair privately, and so save the expense of a long and wearisome public trial?'

'I will report your proposal; but I cannot say I will advise my client to close with it.'

'I scarcely supposed you would,' remarked Circum. 'You lawyers, of course, like to see the law courts fully employed.'

'That is a little hard upon us,' said Mr Sims, looking straight into the eyes of Circum, as if he would pierce through them into the inmost recesses of his brain; 'but he had to deal with one equally cool and watchful as himself, and therefore gained no more knowledge of what was passing within, than he would have done from the most vacant and unmeaning stare.

'I am returning to London to-morrow,' said Circum; 'but perhaps you will kindly say to Sir Edward that I shall stop in the house for the remainder of the day, and that if he will call

upon me with his son, I shall be happy to speak to him upon another subject, on which I slightly touched this morning. You need not look suspiciously at me, for I can assure you the business I would speak to him upon does not bear in the slightest degree any relation to the matter we have been discussing, and now I suppose I may say good-bye, as I am not likely to have a call from you again for some time?'

'No,' said Mr Sims, 'for the future I will confer with you through your solicitor, if you will oblige me with his address.'

'There will be time enough for that,' said Circum, 'when all hope of a private accommodation has passed away for the present on account of the children, I will not incur the responsibility of appealing to the law to do what may so much more inexpensively be done in a Christian spirit at a friendly meeting of all persons interested in the question.'

'It is for you to decide whether you will or will not commence an action. My client stands upon firm ground, if you remain inactive.'

'Yes, I am aware of that. Good morning, sir.'

'A man not to be trifled with,' murmured Circum, as the door closed upon his visitor. 'We shall have a tough fight before it is over,

and if we break down it will be for want of the sinews of war. I must let Lyson's letters go at any reasonable figure, with or without his consent. We must have money for our great enterprise.'

The manner of Mr Sims, on his return to the Hall, was not very reassuring. He felt that, in Circum, he had to deal with a man evidently well acquainted with the subject he had taken in hand; and, as he thought, resolved to turn it to account for his own advantage. He did not absolutely advise Sir Edward to come to terms with the stranger, but the whole tone of his remarks pointed in that direction, as he spoke of the danger of drifting into a ruinous law-suit, the uncertainty of which no one could tell.'

'Do you incline to believe,' asked Sir Edward, 'after all you have heard, that the children were lawfully begotten?'

'No, I do not,' replied Mr Sims; 'but my view of the case and that of twelve jurymen may be widely different.'

'If he can satisfy me of the justice of his claim, I am prepared to give up every acre I possess without further question.'

'I honour your motive,' said Mr Sims; 'but you must not expect me to approve of any hasty action on your part.'

'I am content,' said Sir Edward, 'to appear a little singular. And now, with respect to the other matter to which he alluded, I dare say I shall surprise you when I tell you I have made up my mind to go to him immediately.'

'Not alone, I trust?' said Mr Sims.

'Yes, alone,' replied Sir Edward; 'but I promise you not a word shall pass my lips upon the subject I have placed in your hands. Shall I find you here on my return?'

'I must be in London to-night,' replied Mr Sims, 'but I will wait to see you again. Perhaps, while you are away, Jesse will take me to see your late old servant. If he can, or will answer one or two questions satisfactorily, I shall see my way more clearly than I confess I do at present. Then there is the supposed heir I should like to see; but you say he is at Bath; I think you said you had his sister with you?'

'No,' replied Sir Edward, 'she is in London.'

'With whom, may I ask?'

'With a trustworthy old servant.'

'She must not be left there with a servant. It is possible this man Circum has met with her in London.'

'Possible, but not very probable,' said Sir Edward.

'He spoke of her to me as an important link in the chain of his evidence, and he must have been in correspondence with her by some means, unless his statement respecting her is altogether fictitious. She must not be left there, however faithful the old servant may be.'

'We will speak of her on my return,' said Sir Edward; 'I must leave you now for a while with Jesse.'

'And Mr Jesse will take me to the old steward.'

'I shall be happy to do so,' said Jesse, 'but I am afraid you will find him an unprofitable subject.'

'You told me you were a man of few words,' said Sir Edward, on being introduced to Circum. 'I am here to prove you. You also told me you had seen certain letters which I wrote a long time since, and—'

'I beg your pardon, Sir Edward; I told you I had them in my possession.'

'Have you them here?'

'I have.'

'They are of no use to you.'

'But they are very curious.'

'But of no value to you.'

'But they are to a certain friend of mine.'

'Will you part with them?'

'Without his consent, surely you would not ask me to do that?'

'You did not steal them from him?'

'No; why do you ask such a question?'

'Because, if you did not, I conclude he entrusted them with you for you to do the best you could with them.'

'Just so,' said Circum.

'Then they have their price?'

'Yes.'

'I will buy them.'

'It must be from a liberal offer.'

'Is their price fixed?'

'No; I am waiting for your offer. They should be very valuable to you.'

'Will a cheque for fifty pounds suffice?'

'What!' said Circum, 'five such interesting and very loving letters for fifty pounds. No, Sir Edward, nor five times fifty.'

'In God's name,' cried Sir Edward, 'let me know their price and have done with it!'

'Five letters,' said Circum slowly, 'they must to you be cheap at a hundred pounds a-piece. Well, then, let us say for the lot five hundred pounds. Will you have them?'

'Let me see them,' said Sir Edward.

Circum eyed his visitor for a brief space,

then deliberately unlocked his bag and produced the letters, observing as he did so,—

'You are younger and stronger than I am, but you see, Sir Edward, I am not afraid of trusting myself and my fortune in your hands.'

Sir Edward, being satisfied that they were the letters he desired to see reduced to ashes, drew from his pocket his cheque-book, and filled up a cheque for the sum required. Then, with inexpressible satisfaction, committed the letters to the flames.

Circum, as he carefully put away the cheque in his pocket-book, looked at the destruction going on in the grate as a matter that did not in the least concern him. When he saw his visitor about to leave the room, he said,—

'I suppose I am to understand the more serious business we spoke about this morning is not at present to be proceeded with?'

'I have placed it in the hands of my solicitor,' replied Sir Edward as he left the room.

'And you will be fortunate,' said Circum, 'if you get through that business as cheaply and easily as you have through this.'

Sir Edward returned to his friends at the Hall a free man, and it was not without difficulty that he could keep quiet to listen calmly to the report Mr Sims had to give him of his

interview with the old steward. He had learnt nothing from him worth repeating.

'The poor old fellow,' he said, 'seemed quite worn out and incapable of understanding the simplest question; and therefore anything he might say in his present state would have no weight in a court of justice. Now, if you can secure the young gentleman at Bath, and the young lady in London, you will, I suspect, very much reduce the power of the enemy.'

While he was speaking a servant entered the room with a letter.

'For me,' said Jesse as it was presented to him. Having glanced at the address, he was about to put it in his pocket when, seeing all eyes were fixed on Mr Sims, he ventured to open it. Before the speaker's remarks could be replied to, Jesse suddenly exclaimed,—'I have surely another surprise for you all! This is from Miss Montag, and here she says she has had an old gentleman to see her who has told her who she is, and who wanted her to sign a paper, and I don't know what besides, before he left her to go to Bath to see her brother.'

When the commotion called forth by Jesse's exclamation had abated, and the old story reconsidered under the new light the letter threw

upon it, the time had arrived for Mr Sims to set out on his return to London. He took with him a note from Sir Edward to Mrs Wilkins, and another from Jesse to Miss Montag, with a commission to take the young lady home to his family in Russell Square, and there await a telegram from Sir Edward to learn what further steps he desired should be taken for her safety.

Before Mr Sims left, Sir Edward took him aside and gave him, in a few brief words, the reasons that had induced him to send, or rather to take, Miss Montag to London, and of having since given the young people permission to correspond with each other. That explanation enabled Mr Sims, on reaching London, to avoid much awkwardness which he might otherwise have had to encounter.

The possession of the cheque for five hundred pounds induced Circum to change the course of action he had previously marked out for himself to take. He had now two objects to induce him to go to London without loss of time—one was to get his cheque turned into gold, and the other to complete his ascendency over the mind of Miss Montag, and induce her privately to leave Mrs Wilkins for a house more suitable to her prospects.

'It is a great bore,' he thought, 'that I cannot set off direct for London without going miles out of my way to see Lyson. He is so jealous of my movements, that I must see him, and tell him of our good fortune. If I were to write and say I was going to London, he would again grow curious to know why; and if I were to add it was to see the girl, and get the cheque changed, it would only make the matter worse, so I must perforce go to him.'

As his pockets would now so soon be bountifully furnished, the expense of the journey was not so much regarded. It was more a question of time than money, so he hired a trap, and leaving word at his lodging that perhaps he would not be back to-night, set off for Downend, with Nancy's voice ringing in his ears, that his room would be ready for him whenever he liked to come. Since the visit to him of Sir Edward, he had mounted up in her estimation she could not tell how high.

Arrived at the vicarage at Downend, Circum was received, if not with open arms, by the sisters at least with the outward expression of a pleasant welcome. From them he learnt that their brother had gone down to the river with his rod and line, and that he would no doubt remain there for an hour or two longer.

'I will go to him to save time,' said Circum, 'as I must, if possible, be in London to-night.'

'Brother told us,' said Miss Lyson, 'after you left us yesterday, that he expected you would send for him to come to you at Woodfield.'

'And I may have occasion to do so in the course of a day or two; but I must be in London to-night, and there is a chance of my being kept there the whole day to-morrow, so, to prevent mistakes, I thought I would drive round here and see him to-night.'

On approaching the river, Circum saw Lyson at his old favourite place on the projecting rock at the bend of its course.

'Why,' he cried, 'you will become an expert at your business if you go on at this rate. You appear to spend all your time here. I suppose you find your occupation amusing?'

'Do you?' said Lyson; 'then I can tell you it is only for want of something better to do that I am here, while you are enjoying yourself driving about the country. I thought you said you would stop at Woodfield to-night, and send for me to come to you. Have you come yourself to fetch me?'

'No; not to-night.'

'Then, have you come to tell me that you have brought that fellow to his knees?'

'He is pretty nearly down. I have warned him of the coming change in his fortune, and at the same time have obtained from him the sinews of war to enable us to take a more deadly and surer aim at our game.'

'If you would be at the trouble of speaking plain English, one might hope to understand you. Will he respond to the charge I mean to make against him?'

'I think he will.'

'Then we shall have him at last.'

'You may demand your wife; but I cannot hear of any evidence at Woodfield that will condemn her.'

'Then you have been playing the fool with me, and not gone the right way to work to get up the evidence?'

'And have you been more fortunate?'

'You told me you would insure me a thousand pounds damages if I would entrust the letters to you.'

'Not so much as that, I think.'

'I swear you did.'

'Then I have been obliged to take less; but I have saved you a world of trouble.'

'What do you mean? Where are the letters?'

'I have sold them for five hundred pounds.'

'Where is the money?'

'It is a cheque, which I must change in London for gold.'

'Show it me. To whom is it made payable?'

'To E. Circum or bearer.'

'Give it me. It is mine.'

'Not quite so fast,' said Circum, endeavouring to put it hastily back into his pocket-book.

To prevent his doing so, Lyson struck the book from his hand, and forgetful of the spot upon which they were standing, grasped the arm of Circum, who still held the cheque between his finger and thumb. A momentary struggle ensued. They approached the edge of the rock, when a portion of it gave way beneath their feet, and they fell struggling together into the deep stream below. There was a splashing noise in the water for two or three minutes, and a faint cry for help. Then all was still, and the current resumed its usual quiet course.

The cheque about which the contention had arisen having escaped from the fingers of the dying man, rose to the surface and went gaily down the river, until it was caught in the roots

of a tree, and then, having been washed bit by bit to pieces, passed as useless away. The float, after a violent shaking, resumed its former quiet, while the two inanimate bodies lay stark and still at the bottom of the pool.

CHAPTER XIV.

NEITHER the struggle in the water nor the faint cry for help was heard by any mortal ear; and as the secluded spot Lyson had chosen for his amusement was out of the track of the country people, it was not till late the next morning that the discovery was made of what had taken place.

Lyson not returning at his usual time to the vicarage, excited at first only the curiosity of his sisters. That, however, soon gave way to alarm. When the sun was just on the point of sinking beneath the western horizon they left the house and hastened towards the river, but it was scarcely with the hope of finding their brother there.

An undefinable sensation of fear that the stranger, from some cause which it would be in vain for them to attempt to conjecture, had

induced him to leave his home. During the last few days he had been very restless, going out and coming in at very unseasonable hours, and, in their opinion, taking more exciting drink than was good for him. He had spoken, too, of expecting a gentleman from London to see him, and often grew impatient and angry at his non-appearance, and wearied with the monotony of his country life.

'I do trust our brother has not again fallen a prey to a false friend, and been obliged to leave us without notice of his going,' said Miss Lyson, as they hurried on their way towards the river.

On reaching the secluded spot their fears were quickly confirmed. They saw the rod hanging over the rock and the float down the stream as far as the line would let it go, struggling to remain quietly at its work.

'He is certainly gone,' said Miss Lyson, 'but he has left his line.'

'And his basket, with two fish in it,' said Dorothy; 'so I hope he will soon come back.'

They waited impatiently for his return until the increasing darkness warned them of the uselessness of their longer stay. They then took the rod and line, with the basket of fish, and slowly retreated homeward, hoping every

moment to hear the well-known footsteps hastening after them. But no such welcome sounds greeted their ears, and they re-entered the vicarage under the impression that he had left the place with the stranger, without giving them any means of judging of the time of his return.

The vicar was very poorly and depressed, and on hearing of the absence of his son, complained bitterly of his inattention to him, as well as of his irregular habits.

'I did hope,' he said, 'that he would change his mode of life, and become a help and comfort to me, but I can now hope no longer;' with much more of the same kind, which the sisters, as they sat by his bedside, strove in vain to silence, until at length he fell asleep.

The watchers waited up till midnight, and would have done so until the dawn of day, had they not known that their brother had a latch-key, and feared he would be angry if he found them sitting up for his return.

The next morning, a few hundred yards down the river from where the accident had happened, a shepherd, going his round of inspection through the fields, saw hanging in a bush on the surface of the water a man's cap, that on examination proved to be like one he

had seen Mr Lyson wearing on the previous day, which induced him to take it to the vicarage to restore it to its supposed owner.

The clue thus discovered was quickly improved upon, and in a short time the bodies of the missing men, clasped firmly together, were brought up from the hole into which they had fallen on the previous afternoon. Whether they had struggled in the water for the mastery, or in the vain hope of saving each other, could not be known. Certain bruises on the head of Lyson made it appear more than probable that he had been injured by striking on a rock in his fall, and had dragged his companion to the bottom with him.

When the news of the unlooked-for event reached Sir Edward and Mr Cresswell, it produced a stunning sensation upon their minds, and for a while they failed to realise the full effect it would have upon the present state of their affairs. They were at the moment in a great state of anxiety about the health of Edith, as during the past evening, while the sisters were by the side of the river awaiting the return of their brother, her illness had undergone a very serious change for the worse, and on the doctor being hastily summoned, she was declared to be in a very critical condition.

And so for nearly a week she lay in extreme danger, often unaware of what was passing around her. Then a slight improvement took place, and the doctor's countenance assumed a more hopeful expression as he gazed upon her. By his orders she was kept in a state of the utmost quiet, and any one who approached her was forbidden to make even the slightest allusion to the death of her husband.

Troubled as he was about the state of his daughter, and the fear of the effect it would have upon the health of his wife, Mr Cresswell, considering the relation in which he stood to the dead man, could not remain a silent spectator of what was passing at Downend. Accompanied by Sir Edward, he drove over to the vicarage to offer his personal sympathy to the suffering and bereaved father.

The sisters received them with a freezing coldness. They had already settled the fact beyond dispute between themselves that the death of their dear brother had been mainly occasioned by the brutal treatment he had received from his father-in-law and the infamous Sir Edward. Having answered their inquiries very briefly, they said they could not admit the gentlemen to their father's presence, as he was not in a fit state to be seen by them.

Their decision, however, was set aside by the action of the servant girl, who, hearing their assertion, muttered to herself, 'What a shame it is not to let master see his friends,' stole up to his bedroom and told him who was below.

The vicar answered faintly, 'Ask them to come up. I should like to see them.'

The girl needed nothing more. In an instant she was downstairs again, and bouncing into the room where the gentlemen were, she cried,—

'Please come with me, the vicar wants to see you.'

'Who told him they were here?' asked Dorothy.

'I did, miss,' replied the girl.

'How dare you!' began Dorothy, when Miss Lyson stopped her with—

'Hush, hush, sister!' and then said to the girl, 'Show the gentlemen to your master's room.'

They found the vicar very sad, and, from physical weakness, unable to converse. After a short stay they left him, with the uncomfortable conviction on their minds that they had done little by their visit more than they might have done by a mere ceremonial expression of their condolence.

The inquest on the bodies of Lyson and

Circum was a very simple affair. As there was no evidence to show how they got into the water, the verdict of 'Found drowned' was all that could be recorded of the event. Out of respect to the vicar, Sir Edward and Mr Cresswell attended the funeral; but the poor man himself was confined to his bed. The sisters were the chief mourners, and as they took their last look into the double grave, whether grief for the dead or hatred for the living was the most predominant feeling in their hearts, it would be difficult to determine.

The young people at the Hall, as might have been expected from their characters, were differently affected by the news from the river. Charlotte, whose mind was of the more serious kind, heard with dismay of two souls being so suddenly snatched away by the angel of death into the unseen world of spirits. She had no clear idea of the life Lyson had led, but she had heard enough to feel that it must have been an awful thing for him to have passed away with his companion in the sudden way he did.

Oliver, on hearing of the sad event, as it was called, did not hesitate to confess that he should never feel comfortable again at passing that part of the river. While Grace, on the contrary, did

her best to induce Mrs Gibson to take a drive over to Downend with her that she might have a good look at the rock from which the men had fallen.

Jesse was not so much affected by the accident to the men themselves, as by the consequences to his family which might follow upon it. He had no reason to fear that there was any one else ready to go on with the case against his father, and owing to the careful manner in which he had pursued his inquiries, he had little hope that anything more respecting the marriage would be brought to light. From the fact of Circum having attempted to tamper with the honesty of Miss Montag, it was apparent, he thought, that he must have felt his case weak before he resorted to that disreputable mode of proceeding.

But although Jesse was so satisfied that all must now go well, Sir Edward, as soon as he heard of the accident, sent off a telegram to Mr Sims to come down to the Hall again as soon as possible. He did not know how far Jesse's presentiments of future peace were to be trusted. It might be that the whole conspiracy against him had disappeared with the dead men in the river, but as there was a chance of another party coming on the scene to

continue the struggle, he would endeavour to be prepared to meet it.

In the early part of the afternoon Mr Sims arrived, when, having been made acquainted with what had occurred since he left yesterday, he relieved his client from all fear of further annoyance, by taking upon himself the responsibility of dealing with any new comers. In answer to an inquiry respecting Miss Montag, his report was very favourable.

'She was a little excited,' he said, 'when he first saw her at Islington, but that on reading Mr Jesse's letter and looking over that which had been sent to Mrs Wilkins, she had expressed herself satisfied and willing to go away with him.'

'If you can keep her with your family for a few days,' said Sir Edward, 'you will greatly oblige me.'

'I shall be most happy to do so,' replied Mr Sims. 'I left her with my children in the nursery this morning apparently happy and content, amusing the younger children and making friends with their elders. To-morrow, agreeable to your request, I will run down to Bath, and from the description you have given me of the youth Montag I do not anticipate any difficulty with him.'

The report of the inquest on the bodies was looked forward to with something like dread by Sir Edward. Any papers that the stranger had left at his lodgings, or might be found upon his person, he knew would come under the eye of the coroner. He did not care for any that might refer to him in connection with his property, but should there be any found coupling his name with Mr Cresswell or Edith, it might lead to much unpleasantness. And also the cheque for five hundred pounds, should it come before the jury, it would, perchance, lead to some very awkward questioning.

Fortunately for Sir Edward, Circum was a man who did not trust his secrets on paper. Experience had taught him that the pen was a traitor and not to be trusted. That the safest scheme was that which was locked up in the breast of the schemer. In consequence of this peculiarity in his way of conducting business, no papers of consequence were found, either at his lodgings or on his person, and the cheque, as the reader knows, had disappeared in the water.

But as Sir Edward knew nothing of the destruction of the cheque, he watched nervously for its production while the inquiry was in progress; but as it did not appear, he concluded

that Circum had found means to get it cashed by sending it to a friend in London, and, under this impression for some time afterwards, he closely examined his bank-book expecting to see its entrance there. But no such item was to be found, and in the end he was obliged to give up the idea of discovering what had become of it as a problem beyond his power to solve.

The old steward's evidence of the marriage remaining incomplete was a sore annoyance to Jesse, for although he had no doubt about the question himself, he felt it would be more satisfactory to his father to have it cleared up beyond the possibility of dispute. With a view of bringing about a reconciliation with the old man, he called at the cottage several times to make inquiries for his health, under the severe attack of gout from which he was reported to be suffering. But nothing came of it. The old man had had his say and he would say no more. The power of the great house had lost its influence over him.

But the state of affairs within the cottage went on daily improving. No sooner was the inquest concluded, and Lea saw that he had nothing to fear from any disclosures that had been made while it was going on, and had

satisfied the solicitor that he had passed into his dotage, than he threw off his fit of the gout and took his place in the little parlour downstairs with an amount of self-complacency that proved, however harsh he might be to others, he was on very good terms with himself.

The attention he received from Mrs Brown was all he could desire. He had performed his part so well that even she had been deceived. She had looked upon his attack of gout as real, and treated him accordingly. This was very gratifying to him on more than one account. While it showed him that he had yet power to work under a mask, it also assured him that if he should really fall ill he would have a capital nurse ready at hand, and a boy to run his errands and amuse him with his tricks, when he should be disposed to let him indulge in them.

His leaving the Hall so suddenly would have caused more gossip had Sir Edward appeared annoyed at his going, which he was careful not to do. When the old man was reported to be ill he sent to inquire for him, but after what had passed between him and Jesse he did not himself call at the cottage. It was generally understood that the separation had taken place in consequence of the growing infirmity of the

old servant, and that he might have entire rest.

Though the boy Stephen had ceased to worry the villagers, his nature was by no means changed; he was still the same lively, active little fellow he ever had been. The change that had taken place arose from the new position in which the presence of Lea in the cottage placed him. Formerly he had nothing to do out of school hours but to sit down quietly with Mrs Brown, or run about in the roads ready for any playful mischief he could hit upon.

Now, when he was not sent on an errand, Lea would keep him constantly as a companion, and it soon became one of the common sights for the villagers to look upon an old man, with his stick on one side and a boy on the other, going about from point to point, where a seat could be obtained on a fallen tree or a rock by the roadside.

No sooner would Lea seat himself than the boy's arms and legs would get into motion, and he would be up in a tree or jumping a ditch with as much zest as ever. When at home he was often employed in reading to Lea, who, leaning back in his chair, listened with his eyes half closed, while Mrs Brown sat with her work-basket before her, looking with admiration on

her darling boy rather than making any noticeable progress with her work.

'This will do,' thought Lea. 'I worked hard in my young days, and I will take my ease in my old ones.' But his position with respect to Mrs Brown he found was becoming a little awkward. She was gaining a certain ascendency over his mind, which he felt but could not shake off. What should he do? Should he, snail like, draw himself back into his shell of cold selfishness, and let her see that he did not require her watchful attention, though he could not but be sensible that it tended more to his comfort than otherwise? or should he declare himself conquered by her goodness, and ask her to sink the name of Brown into that of Lea?

This became an urgent question, and one he must decide for himself, for Mrs Brown made no immodest advances towards him, nor evinced the slightest intention of being ever disposed to do so.

One day, when seated on a log of wood in the lane, he beckoned Stephen to his side, and said abruptly to him,—

'Don't you think it would be a good thing if we were to have a pony carriage to ride about the country in?'

'And for me to ride the pony? Yes; I should think it would be capital.'

'Not to ride; I mean to drive; but here comes Mrs Brown, we will ask her what she thinks about it.'

Mrs Brown thought it would be very pleasant.

'But where could you keep the pony?' asked Stephen.

'We must find a stable for him, and perhaps a larger house for ourselves, if Mrs Brown will go and take care of it for us.'

'Don't you find the cottage comfortable?' asked Mrs Brown.

'Yes,' said Lea; 'but I would rather be my own landlord. I don't like feeling I am under the Hall people. I tell you what we will do, if you like. I see by the newspaper there is a moderate-sized house, with a stable, orchard, and garden, for sale about three miles from Woodfield village, out of the parish, and separated by a field or two from Sir Edward's property. We will get a carriage from the inn and go over and look at it. It is a new house on an old foundation, I believe, so I dare say you will find plenty of room in the cellars, if we go there, to put wood, coal, and all that sort of thing out of sight.'

'I may go with you?' said Stephen.

'Yes; we will all go together.'

'Oh, capital,' cried Stephen, as he turned a somersault on the grass expressive of his delight.

'What do you say, Mrs Brown?' asked Lea.

'I shall be pleased to go with you.'

'And if you like the house, will you leave the cottage for it and be the wife of the master?'

'I think we had better talk of that indoors.'

'Then let us go in directly,' said Lea, 'and settle the business, for it is no use thinking of it or talking of it any longer. Here, Stephen, you run up to the post-office and get six penny stamps.'

The indoor affair took but a short time to arrange. Long before Stephen could get back with the stamps, Mrs Brown had consented to become Mrs Lea, and that not altogether from selfish motives. She saw that her old lover could not live alone and take care of himself without the chance of his being constantly in trouble from one cause or another. That as he had proposed to her she could only live with him as his wife in the same house, or send him out to seek lodgings elsewhere.

The preparations for the marriage were soon completed, the licence procured, and the ceremony performed by the vicar. No company was invited, and only Stephen went with them in the carriage to the church. The vicar disliking to see a curious, gaping crowd in the church, willingly attended to Lea's request, that the noise of what was about to take place should not go abroad to the villagers, dispensed with the services of the clerk, and with the curate alone performed the ceremony.

On leaving the church Lea proposed that before they returned to the cottage they should drive over and look at the house of which he was in treaty for the purchase.

When they reached the house he said to the driver, 'You will be in the way to take us back in the course of an hour,' and was then received with his companions in at the front door by a woman who had been appointed to attend on the visitors. It was a modern, quiet-looking building, almost square, with two sitting-rooms, a kitchen, and scullery on the ground floor, and four bedrooms above. 'Just the place for a little family like ours,' said Lea. 'We don't want to look at the cellars, I think?'

'I will take a peep at them for you,' cried Stephen, as he darted down the steps leading

to them. Before they had time to move far away he was back again, declaring they looked large enough to hold wood and coal for the next twenty years. 'Where are you going now?'

'To look at the stables,' said Lea.

'Ah! that's the thing,' cried Stephen; 'I want to look at them. Is the pony there?'

'No; he is not bought yet.'

No sooner was the stable door open than the boy was up in the loft and down again, rummaging about in every hole and corner. 'What a capital thing for a swing!' he exclaimed, as he looked admiringly upon a coil of scaffolding rope which had been left there by one of the workmen who had been lately employed in some brushing up on the exterior of the house.

'And now for the orchard,' said Lea, 'where the cherries, apples, pears, and plums are to grow.'

A part of the orchard had formerly been occupied by some outhouses, a barn, and stables, but all that remained of them now were a few of the foundations in the ground. The buildings themselves had entirely disappeared. During the time of the rebuilding of the house some of the old material had been dug up and used. In levelling the ground again the

labourers carelessly spread the waste stuff over some old timber that had been placed there to cover up a disused well of some twenty feet deep.

On the spot which must, as the timber rotted away beneath, become a trap to any one who ventured upon it, a large log of wood had been accidently placed.

'I think I will take a rest here,' said Lea, 'before we go to the garden.' As he spoke he sat heavily down on what appeared a very comfortable seat. But, alas! for the old bridegroom, it did not prove a comfortable seat for him, as his weight, added to the heavy log, was more than the rotten timbers below could bear, so down they went with earth, log, and Lea, all rattling down together into the abyss below, where there was some five or six feet of water cold as ice ready to receive them.

Lea was the last to disappear, and as his wife, who was at a little distance, saw him going down, she stood transfixed to the spot, unable to speak or move. The boy, who was by the side of Lea, only saved himself by a desperate leap over the moving mass. He saw what was taking place, and without a word rushed back to the stable at such a rate that he almost appeared to fly.

In a few seconds he was back again with the coil of rope he had seen in the stable. Fixing one end of it round a tree, he threw the other into the well, and then, like a monkey, went down hand under hand, as he had done many times before from the trees by the road-side.

He was at the bottom not a moment too soon; holding on to the rope with one hand, he groped about with the other until it came in contact with Lea, who was struggling with the log to keep his head above water.

The disappearance of Stephen into the well after her husband, acted like an electric shock upon Mrs Lea. Her voice came back to her in a scream of horror that rang for a mile round the place, causing every one who was sitting to start up in a fright, and those who were standing or walking to rush forward they knew not whither.

The woman from the house and the man from the carriage were the first to reach the spot. These were quickly followed by two men who happened to be passing down the road at the time. Mrs Lea, in her fright, could do nothing more than scream. 'There! there!' as she pointed to the hole that had so suddenly appeared before her.

But nothing more was wanted, as the voice of Stephen rang out from below,—

'Don't be afraid; we are all right down here. Get somebody to help you pull up Mr Lea.'

'All right,' said one of the men. 'Get the rope round under his arms, and we'll soon have him up.'

But this did not appear an easy matter for Stephen to accomplish, as the sounds of splashing about in the water, mingled with the groans of the old man, rose up to the listeners above. One of the men threw himself at length on the ground, and stretching his head out over the hole, looked cautiously down; but he found that he was perfectly helpless to aid the strugglers below, till he heard the boy say,—

'Now, you are all right; just hold on with your hands while I go up and see who is come to help us.'

'Don't leave me, don't leave me,' said Lea, in a feeble voice.

'Back again in a minute,' cried Stephen; then, like a cat, up the rope he went, till he saw the men at the surface, when he slipped back again to the bottom, and called out, 'pull away; we'll soon be up with you.'

It required some care on the part of the men

above in pulling at the rope to prevent the stones and rubbish from falling down on the heads of those below. But in a few minutes the work was safely accomplished, Lea's body rose to the surface, and was dragged away from the hole.

'The boy, the boy!' cried Mrs Lea; 'where is the boy?'

'All right, on the log,' came up from below. 'Send me down the rope again, and I'll soon be up with you.'

As quickly as it could be detached from Lea's body it was carefully returned to the boy, who, putting it down, heedless of the falling rubbish, till he felt it tightened by the tree, before a hand could be stretched out to help him, sprang out upon the grass, and began to shake himself, after the drenching he had had below, like a dog on a river's bank.

Seeing he was safe, Mrs Lea turned her undivided attention to her husband.

'Are you much hurt?' she asked.

'I don't know; I can't tell,' he murmured. 'Get me some brandy.'

Fortunately there was a roadside public-house near at hand ready to supply the stimulant, which Lea drank very freely. By that time a little crowd had collected round them,

and what was next to be done became a very lively question. One said run for the doctor; another, get him into the house; and another, carry him to the public.

'If my arms and legs are not all broken, take me back to the cottage,' murmured Lea.

'Oh, they are all right,' said Stephen. 'We are only a little wet.'

Lea had for a moment been stunned by his fall; but, fortunately for him, the dry log on which he was sitting was the first to reach the water, and which his weight carried to the bottom of the well like a stone, but was not able to keep it there. He rose with it to the surface, and was then canted off into the water, where he was struggling with it for his life when Stephen came so opportunely to his assistance. He was greatly alarmed, and very much shaken and bruised; but he did not lose his senses for more than an instant.

Rolled up in some blankets which were brought from the house, he was carried out into the road, placed in the carriage, and driven to the cottage; while the crowd that had gathered round having freely commented on the cause and consequence of the accident gradually dispersed.

With the driver's and the boy's assistance,

Mrs Lea managed to get her husband to the bedroom and into bed. The brandy, of which he had so freely drunk, had for the time stimulated the action of his heart, and made him insensible, to a certain extent, to the injuries he had received.

Having made her husband as comfortable as she could, Mrs Lea turned her attention to Stephen; but he did not want her assistance. She saw he had divested himself of his wet clothes, and was pleased to hear him declare that he was all right and dry, and ready for anything she had for him to do.

'Shall I send for the doctor?' asked the trembling wife.

'No, no,' sighed Lea. 'Let me lie quietly here; I don't want him.'

But the doctor was soon by his side; for on passing down the road he heard of the accident, and good-naturedly called to see if his services were needed.

Lea did not offer any opposition to his entrance. The shock he had received or the brandy he had taken, or both combined, rendered him passive in the hands of his wife, who, feeling the responsibility that rested upon her, said, 'You must see the doctor, now he has called.'

'Don't leave me alone with him,' murmured Lea.

A few questions and a slight examination served to show that no bones had been broken; then the doctor, with a few cheery words to the patient, withdrew from the room, directing Mrs Lea to keep her husband quietly in bed until he should call again to see the effect some medicine would produce that he would immediately send.

'Does he think I am killed?' asked Lea.

'Oh dear, no,' said his wife in an assuring tone.

'I should have been drowned had Stephen not come down to me.'

'Oh no, you wouldn't,' cried Stephen. 'You had hold of the log when I got down to you, though it was a rather tumble-about sort of thing to get upon.'

The medicine was soon at the cottage, and the half-conscious man induced to take it. In a short time it produced a soothing effect upon his nerves, and he fell asleep.

'You sit by him,' said Mrs Lea to Stephen, 'while I go and change my dress, for I feel almost as if I had been in a well myself.'

CHAPTER XV.

WHILE following up the history of the old steward at the cottage, we have not been unmindful of the state of affairs at the Hall, where we left Edith slightly improved after a week's dangerous illness. Happily no relapse came to re-awaken the great anxiety of her friends, and in the course of a few days the physician was able to say that the crisis was passed, and if no untoward event intervened, she would shortly be convalescent, and able to undertake a little journey for the benefit of the sea air.

This announcement was listened to by Sir Edward with very different feelings to the late proposal for a journey to Scotland or Wales. He had now no fear that, go wherever she chose, she would meet with any one to annoy or injure her, and therefore it was readily arranged that, as soon as she was able, accompanied by

her father and mother, she should go down to Brighton for a few days or weeks before returning to Downend, to prepare for a longer journey.

The news of her changed condition was gradually unfolded to Edith by her mother. She did not, however, for some time know how sad had been the end of her husband, but she realised the fact that he was gone, and she was free; and who will blame her when she felt a sense of relief steal over her heart if she did not instantly endeavour to check it.

His anxiety on his visitor's account having subsided, Sir Edward was able and at liberty to turn his attention more fully to the matter in which he knew Jesse felt himself so deeply interested. By giving his consent that he might correspond with Miss Montag, he had plainly enough foreshadowed his intention of, under certain conditions, allowing them at no distant period to meet. But, while the question of the property remained undetermined, he would not proceed to anything like decided action.

They were still both young, and had, perhaps, formed no lasting love and esteem for each other. He spoke in this way to Jesse, who, with the confidence of youth and the truthfulness of a first passion, put the idea of

their love for each other not lasting away from him with a laugh of derision as not worthy of a reply in words.

'You have behaved very well, Jesse,' said Sir Edward, with tears in his eyes; 'since circumstances, as I viewed them, compelled me to put your faith in my just dealing to a very severe test. I will not now attempt to disguise from you that I took Miss Montag to London, in the hope that your love was but a boy-and-girl affair, which would fade away under a short separation.'

'I admit that I was wrong, and that your attachment to each other was of a deeper and more enduring character than I had given you credit for. I could wish that your affections had remained untouched until you had finished your university course, and were fully prepared for your career in life, but I will not ask you to believe that I have your interest in view in what I am about to propose, as I am confident you are aware of the fact.

'Observation, I am assured, must have convinced you that a man should be prepared for a married life before he undertakes its duties. Marriage first, and the university afterwards, is contrary to all reason and order. In consenting, therefore, to your proposing to Miss Mon-

tag, it is my wish that, immediately you have publicly done so, you should enter your name either at the University of Oxford or Cambridge, and agree to keep your terms there for at least two years.'

'I can have no objection to offer to that,' replied Jesse.

'With respect to Miss Montag, if she is agreeable, she shall be supplied with efficient masters at a good finishing school, where she will receive suitable instruction to fit her for the position you intend she shall occupy in your house.'

'Father,' cried Jesse, 'you make me feel as if I had already accomplished the most earnest desire of my heart. How can I sufficiently thank you for your thoughtful kindness?

'By continuing the course you have so fairly commenced,' replied Sir Edward. 'And with respect to Mr Montag, I can have but little to say. All the reports I get of him are very good, and I have no fear that his future will be different from the past, or that any misunderstanding can arise between us. It shall be my care to see that he has an opportunity of preparing himself for a position in life suitable to his natural abilities.'

'Am I at liberty,' asked Jesse, 'to communicate this good news to Miss Montag?'

'Yes,' replied Sir Edward; 'and if she is prepared to receive you for a few hours, I will get you to take a message from me to Mr Sims in Russell Square, where you will doubtless find the means of seeing her.'

Jesse was too happy for words to show the depth of his gratitude. He rose from his chair, seized his father's hand, and pressed it to his lips. Then with 'Thank you, thank you,' turned away and hastily left the room.

'Poor boy!' sighed Sir Edward, 'he little dreams of the trials and temptations that the world has in store for him.'

Guided by the physician's opinion of Edith's ability for her short journey, Mr Cresswell took her with her mother and Grace, as a special favour, on their visit to Brighton; further arrangements for a longer journey being left until their return to Downend. Sir Edward felt a strange loneliness steal over him on their leaving the Hall. He would fain have found an excuse for going with them, but as he could not well do so, he busied himself with his home duties, and those falling to him from the offices he held in the county, and

by that means avoided the unpleasant feeling of having time hang heavily on his hands.

Mr Gordon again became a frequent guest at the Hall. The trouble that had of late held its court there had for a time put a check upon the meeting of the friends, but they now appeared in a fair way of compensating themselves for the interruption. Charlotte also resumed her place beside Miss Gordon; worked with her at home, and went with her, attended by Oliver, the round of the poor and sick of the parish.

She was a little surprised and amused with the unabashed, easy manner in which Oliver met Miss Gordon and conversed with her upon the incidents of the day as they came before them, that proved that, in her presence at least, his shyness was rapidly passing away. She, however, no sooner ventured on a word of banter to Miss Gordon on the subject, than she was stopped by the information that, while she was absent in attendance on Edith, Mr Gibbs, the curate, had grown quite melancholy, so that even the most approved jest could not win from him a smile.

Return we now to the cottage to take our final leave of the old steward. As he has hitherto not done much to engage the sympathy of the reader, we shall not dwell on any incidents

that took place in his room for the next fortnight after his marriage and accident at the well. That he had been very much shaken and bruised there could be no doubt; but under the clever treatment of the doctor, and the careful nursing of his wife and Stephen, he was enabled, at the end of that time, with their assistance, to get downstairs again to his arm-chair, and answer the inquiries that were daily made for his health from the Hall.

As days passed away, a change appeared to be gradually taking place in the temper and mind of the old man. He was far from losing his old irritable way of talking entirely, or his suspicious scrutiny of what was going on around him; but still, generally speaking, he was growing less exacting and more easily pleased with what was set before him. On one point, however, he was as stern and hard as ever. It related to his late accident.

On his being sufficiently recovered to go into the question of the injury he had received, he threatened to enter an action against the owner of the house for having such a trap as a covered well on his premises. He could prove the owner knew of its existence, and he believed he was in a fair way of obtaining substantial damages. His wife begged him

not to worry himself with a lawsuit. But for a time he would not listen to her, and was only brought to do so at last by an intimation from the owner's solicitor, that he was open to an arrangement.

'Let him give the boy fifty pounds who saved my life, for I am sick of hearing of it,' said Lea.

This, after a little higgling on the part of the solicitor to reduce the sum, being agreed to, the money was paid into the bank to the credit of Edmund Montag, in trust for Stephen Elvin.

After about a week's occupation of the arm-chair, Lea, supported by his wife, was able to get out of doors for a little walk. But, with his returning strength, the effects of his sudden plunge into the well did not pass away. The wheezing at his chest, which of old was disagreeable, now became very troublesome; with the addition of a hard cough, especially at night, when it kept him for hours together painfully awake.

His chief employment of an evening was to have one of his large boxes brought to him, which years since he had filled with smaller ones, each one containing a separate set of papers. Unlike Circum, his object through

life seemed to have been to keep a written record of all the little events in which he had been concerned. For what purpose he did so he never told any one, and it is just possible he did not know himself. But that the habit had become a second nature to him, was apparent by the careful manner, after looking over the papers, he tied them up again in bundles, and restored them to their close packing in the small boxes.

'Why, you have papers enough,' said Stephen, one evening as they were sitting together, 'to make a hundred school books.'

'They are not to be read by any one but myself.'

'But what will you do with them after you are dead?' asked Stephen.

'After I am dead?' repeated Lea.

'Yes,' replied Stephen; 'you can't carry them with you, you know, because the Bible says, "We brought nothing into the world, and we can carry nothing out," and I can show you where it says so. Can't I?' he added, turning to Mrs Lea.

'Yes, and a great deal more that is in the Bible, I hope,' replied Mrs Lea.

'After I am dead!' thoughtfully repeated the old man.

'Yes,' said Stephen. 'What will you do with them then?'

'Suppose I say they shall be yours?'

'Then I shall give them to Mr Montag when I see him, and ask him to read them to me.'

'Would you, indeed?'

'Yes, because I don't think I could read them all myself.'

During the evening Lea went on mechanically with his work, saying but little to either of his companions, but occasionally murmuring to himself, 'That is of no use, as he threw a loose piece of paper on the fire.'

The next evening he became more destructive, and instead of its being the few pieces that went to the fire, it was the few that escaped, until each box that came under review returned to its place almost empty. The idea that Stephen had suggested to him of what he would do with them after he was dead, had been deeply impressed on his mind, and a voice had seemed to whisper in his ear,—'Why, they will pass into the hands of others, who will learn the secrets of your life.'

'But they are old friends,' he thought, 'some of them very old friends. But still the work of destruction went on at an increasing rate, till

all but a few papers remained, which he read carefully over, adding here and there an explanatory note. Then he placed them neatly together in a large envelope, and wrote on the outside, 'Not to be opened while I am alive.'

Following this, the time appeared to hang heavily on his hands, and his irritability in a great measure returned to the sore trial of the patience of his wife and Stephen. His breathing became more difficult, which the doctor observing, said to Mrs Lea on the following day,—

'I am afraid the case of my old friend is growing very serious, and it would be well if he has any arrangements to make about his property, if he set about the task without delay.'

'Do you think he will not get well again?'

'I see no appearance of his amendment at present, though he has a strong constitution, and may rally when we least expect it.'

Mrs Lea being of a serious turn of mind, set herself to work to discover the means by which she could make her husband sensible of the dangerous nature of his illness; but she soon saw that he purposely misunderstood what she was endeavouring to do. To Mr Gordon, who

called to see him, he was morose in his manner and unstudied in his speech, and when reminded of it by his wife, he replied,—

'I have seen too much of your fair-speaking parsons to have any faith in them.'

'But faith in the gospel is all that is required.'

'Oh yes, so they say; but how do they show it themselves?'

After one of his severe fits of coughing, he said to Stephen,—

'My boy, I begin to think it is nearly all up with me. You got me out of the well, but I have been no better than a dead man ever since.'

'You must keep up your spirits,' said the boy.

'I have none to keep up,' said Lea. 'I left them all in the well, and just at the time, too, when we were going to make everything so comfortable in our new house.'

The closer relations into which the old people were now brought, revealed to the self-sacrificing wife that her husband was far from happy. That, under his outside appearance of roughness and ill temper, he had troubles of conscience to deal with that he could not quiet nor escape from.

Jesse had been several times to see him

without gaining admittance further than the entrance at the door; but one morning on calling, after Lea had passed a very restless night, he was invited to go up to his room. After he had sat by the bedside of the sick man for a few minutes, Lea addressed him abruptly in his broken voice, and said,—

'Mr Jesse, I insulted you before I left the Hall, and I suppose I ought to beg your pardon.'

'If any pardon is necessary,' said Jesse, 'it is freely yours.'

'Since that time I have suffered much in mind and body, though I have fought hard against giving way. I knew what you wanted when you spoke to me about Germany, and I would have satisfied you in a moment, could I have done so without proclaiming myself a villain. Now, promise me one thing and you shall know all.'

'I will promise anything you can justly require of me.'

'It is only if I place an envelope in your hands you will not open it till I am dead.'

'I promise,' said Jesse.

'Open that box,' said Lea feebly, pointing to one by his side, 'and take out the envelope you will find there. Put it in your pocket, and

remember your promise. I have been a great sinner, and hardly know how to raise my eyes to heaven.'

The next day, after the doctor had called and spoken very plainly of his dying state, he asked his wife to send for Sir Edward and Mr Jesse.

As soon as they presented themselves before him, he said,—

'I have some property to leave behind me, and I want you, Sir Edward, to act as a trustee when I am gone. I dare say I might safely leave all to my wife, for she is very good, but I think I would rather settle it myself. I wish her to have five thousand pounds, and the remainder to go in equal parts to Edmund Montag, Lizzie Montag, and Stephen Elvin. To the former as a recompense for a great injury I did them years ago, and to the latter because he saved me from drowning, and has been very good to me since. I hope they will not fare much worse than my wife.'

A solicitor having been immediately summoned, the will was drawn out, signed, witnessed and sealed in due form, and so far all was satisfactorily settled.

From that time the dying man troubled himself little more about the affairs of this world. His complaints of his sufferings were continuous, and his exactions on his wife's patience to within two days of his death almost beyond endurance. Yet though he lingered on for a

month longer, she was constantly by his side, watchful and prayerful as ever, and thereby gained the sympathy of all, both great and small, in Woodfield.

When Jesse learnt that death had closed the painful scene at the cottage, he, in the presence of his father, opened the envelope that had been entrusted to his care. In a few minutes all their doubts were at an end. They read in Lea's confession that he had been the chief cause of bringing the poor woman who died in the park to her miserable end. That he had schemed to make her marriage illegal, so that his young master might rid himself of her whenever he should be disposed to do so; that after the young man's death, he had gone to her and informed her of the cheat that had been played off upon her, but which he could not induce her to believe. He confessed that, for aught he knew, he left her penniless instead of paying over to her a sum of money which had been entrusted to him by his young master for her use. He heard of the birth of her children and the death of her aunt, but he took no means to help her.

He had confirmed himself in his wickedness by thinking she was a fine girl and would soon meet with another protector. Of her setting out for England he had no expectation or fear. How she managed to cross the sea he could not understand, or how she fell to the low

estate in which she was found. He supposed she had somewhere by the way fallen into bad company and been robbed, but had not been deterred from continuing her journey to Woodfield, which she had discovered was the home of her husband, in the hope of hearing of him there.

'It is a painful subject to contemplate,' said Sir Edward with a sigh. When the reading was finished, and we will not dwell upon it. I will see Mr Montag and explain the whole matter to him. With respect to the sister, I think I will leave the explanation to you, and there the sad affair must end.'

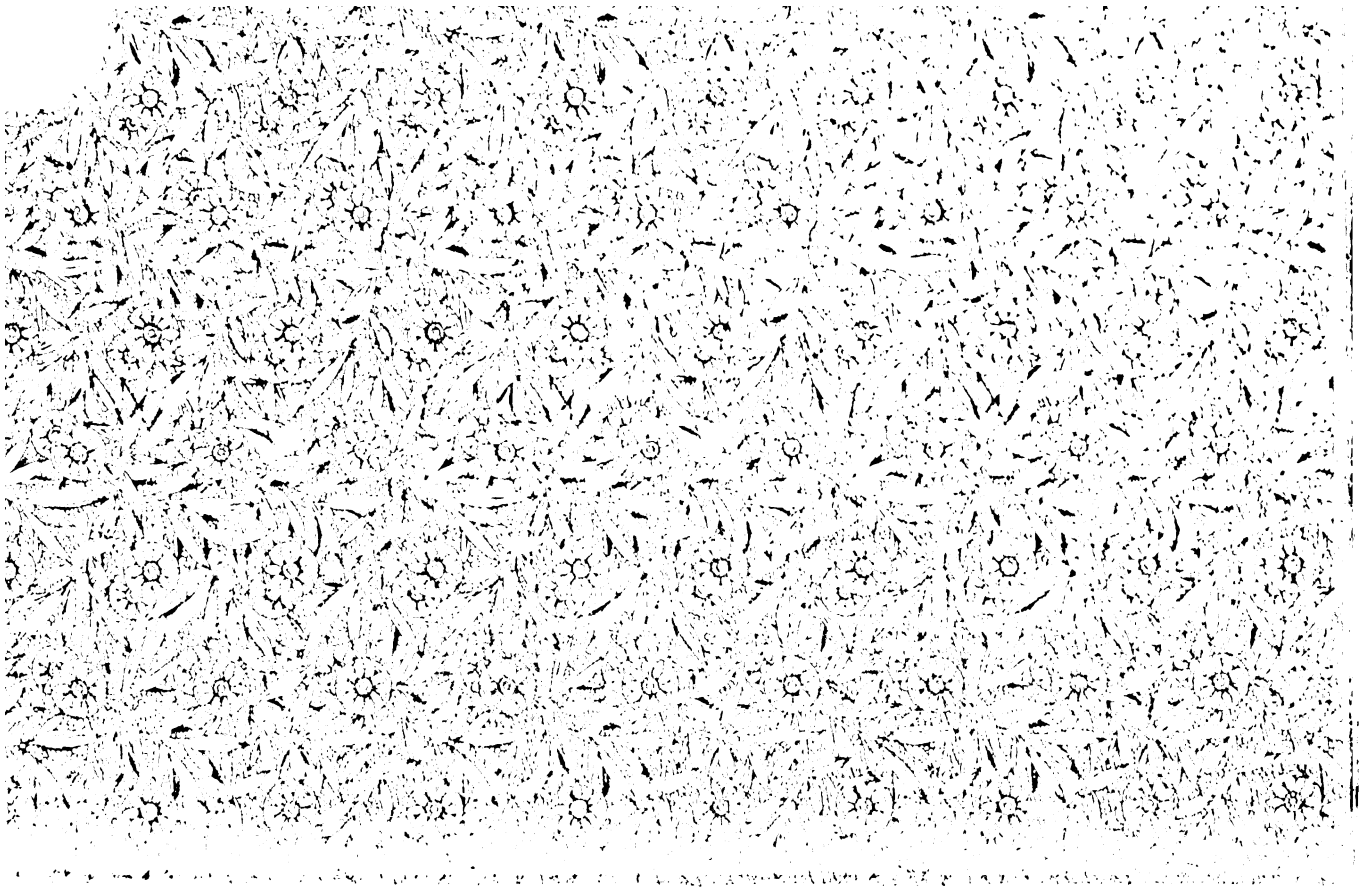
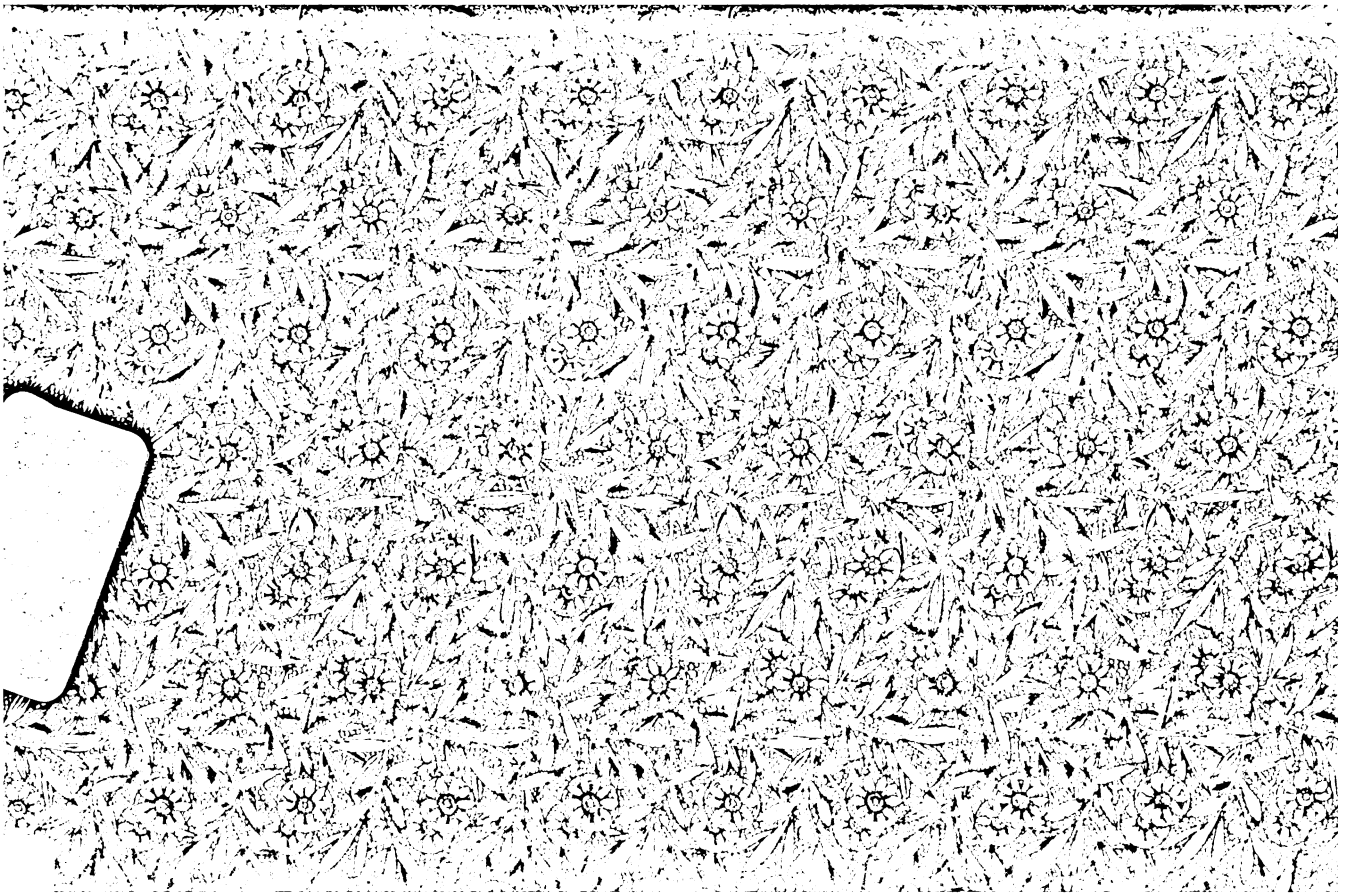
Following the death of the old steward, a state of perfect peace, compared with the late turmoil, prevailed at the Hall. Jesse set himself to work in earnest to prepare for Oxford. A good finishing school was found for Miss Montag, and every advantage offered to her brother for his much-loved study.

The boy Stephen was sent to a better school at a distance, but not far enough to prevent him from continuing to live with Mrs Lea at her cottage.

Mr and Mrs Cresswell, with Edith and Grace, remained at Brighton much longer than the intended time. The sea air proved beneficial to all the party, and they lingered from week to week till the idea of any longer journey faded from their minds. By the time they returned to Downend,

a great change had taken place there. The broken-hearted father had gone down with sorrow to the grave, and his daughters forth into the wide world to seek another home. While the new vicar appointed to the living, bringing his wife and children with him to the renovated house, filled the rooms which had so lately echoed to the shrill voices of the sisters, with sounds of pattering feet and merry laughter.

The changes that promised to take place shortly afterwards at Woodfield between the young people in their parish work, we cannot now enter upon. Nor of the active intercourse that took place between Sir Edward and his old friends at Downend. We must content ourselves by saying that a note of discord was never struck between them, and how many of a contrary nature were sounded during the next two or three years, we will leave without one single word, to the reader's imagination.

THE END.

COLSTON AND SON, PRINTERS, EDINBURGH.